TRISTRAM OF BLENT

POCKET EDITION
of Selected Works of
ANTHONY HOPE

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THE HEART OF PRINCESS OSRA
SOPHY OF KRAVONIA

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TRISTRAM OF BLENT

AN EPISODE IN THE STORY OF AN ANCIENT HOUSE

BY

ANTHONY HOPE

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TRISTRAM OF BLENT

CHAPTER I

A Suppressed Passage

MR JENKINSON NEELD was an elderly man of comfortable private means; he had chambers in Pall Mall, close to the Imperium Club, and his short stoutish figure, topped by a chubby spectacled face, might be seen entering that dignified establishment every day at lunch time, and also at the hour of dinner on the evenings when he had no invitation elsewhere. He had once practised at the Bar, and liked to explain that he had deserted his profession for the pursuit of literature. He did not, however, write on his own account; he edited. He would edit anything provided there was no great public demand for an edition of it. Regardless of present favour, he appealed to posterity—as gentlemen with private means are quite entitled to do. Perhaps he made rather high demands on posterity; but that was his business—and its. At any rate his taste was curious and his conscience acute. He was very minute and very scrupulous, very painstaking and very discreet, in the exercise of his duties. Posterity may perhaps like these qualities in an editor of memoirs and diaries; for such were Mr Neeld's favourite subjects. Sometimes he fell into a sore struggle between curiosity and discretion, having impulses in himself which he forbore to attribute to posterity.

He was in just such a fix now—so he thought to himself—as he perused the manuscript before him. It was the Journal of his deceased friend Josiah Cholderton, sometime Member of Parliament (in the Liberal interest) for the borough of Baxton in Yorkshire, Commercial Delegate to the Congress of Munich in '64, and Inventor of the Hygroxeric Method of Dressing Wool. No wonder posterity was to be interested in Cholderton! Yet at times—and especially during his visits to the Continent—the diarist indulged himself in

digressions about people he encountered ; and these assumed now and then a character so personal, or divulged episodes so private, that the editor had recourse to his blue pencil and drew it with a sigh through pages which he had himself found no small relief from the severer record of Cholderton's services to the commerce of his country. Mr Neeld sat now with blue pencil judicially poised, considering the following passage in his friend's recollections. The entry bore date Heidelberg, 1875.

" At the widow's " (Mr Cholderton is speaking of a certain Madame de Kries) " pleasant villa I became acquainted with a lady who made something of a sensation in her day, and whom I remember both for her own sake and because of a curious occurrence connected with her. A year and a half before (or thereabouts) society had been startled by the elopement of Miss T. with Sir R. E. They were married, went to France, and lived together a month or two. Suddenly Sir R. went off alone ; whose the fault was nobody knew, or at least it never came to my ears. The lady was not long left in solitude, and, when I met her, she passed as Mrs F., wife of Captain F. The Captain seemed to me an ordinary good-looking reckless young fellow ; but Mrs F. was a more striking person. She was tall, graceful, and very fair, a beautiful woman (I might rather say girl) beyond question. Talk revealed her as an absolute child in a moral sense, with a child's infinite candour, a child's infinite deceit, a child's love of praise, a child's defiance of censure where approval would be too dearly earned. She was hardly a reasonable being, as we men of the world understand the term ; she was, however, an exceedingly attractive creature. The natural feelings of a woman, at least, were strong in her, and she was fretting over the prospects of the baby who was soon to be born to her. Captain F. shared her anxiety. I understood their feelings even more fully (in any case the situation was distressing) when I learnt from Madame de Kries that in certain events (which happened later) the lady and her child after her would become persons of rank and importance.

" Now comes the scene which has stamped itself on my memory. I was sitting in Madame de Kries' parlour with her and her daughter—an odd dark little thing, five or six

years old. Suddenly Mrs F. came in. She was in a state of agitation and excitement by no means healthy (I should suppose) for one in her condition. She held a letter in her hand and waved it in the air, crying, ' Sir R.'s dead, Sir R.'s dead ! We can be married ! Oh, we're in time, in time, in time ! ' Extraordinary as such exclamations may appear when the circumstances and my own presence are considered, I have repeated them *verbatim*. Then she sank down on the sofa, Madame de Kries kneeling by her, while the Imp (as I called the child, whom I disliked) stared at her open-eyed, wondering no doubt what the fuss was about. Directly after F. came in, almost as upset as Mrs F., and the pair between them managed to explain to us that she had received a letter from Sir R.'s servant (with whom she had apparently maintained some communication), announcing that his master had, after two days' illness, died of heart complaint on the 6th June. ' Think of the difference it makes, the enormous difference ! ' she gasped, jumping up again and standing in the middle of the room. She was so full of this idea that she did not spare a thought to the dead man or to anything which might strike us as peculiar or distasteful in her own attitude and the way in which she received the news. ' We shall be married directly,' she continued with that strange absence of shame or pretence which always marked her, ' and then it'll be all right, and nobody'll be able to say a word in the future.' She went on in this strain for a long while, until Madame de Kries at last insisted on her calming herself, and proposed to accompany her to her own house. At this point I made my excuses and retired, the Imp following me to the door and asking me, as I went out, why people had to be married again when other people died ; she was a child who needed wiser and firmer bringing-up than her mother gave her.

" I did not myself see Captain and Mrs F. again, as I left Heidelberg the next day, 22nd June. I learnt, however, from Madame de Kries that the wedding was hurried on and took place on the day following my departure ; after this the pair went to Baden, and there, a fortnight later, the child—a boy —was born. I must confess that I was glad the young couple had avoided the calamity they were in dread of, although I

am not sure that I had a right to wish that they should escape the full consequences of their fault.

"My feelings were abruptly changed when, on paying a flying visit to Madame de Kries a few months later, I heard the sequel of the story, told to me in the strictest confidence, and in violation, I fear, of the old lady's pledge of secrecy. (She was a sad gossip, a failing with which I have no sympathy.) Sir R. E. did not, in fact, die on the date reported. He fell into a collapse, mistaken for death by those about him, and even by his medical attendant; after lying in this state for twenty-four hours he revived and lived nearly a week longer. A second letter, apprizing Mrs F. of this fact, and announcing the correct date of his death as 12th June, reached her at Baden on the 28th. By this time she was married, but the validity of her new union (solemnized on the 23rd) did not appear to be affected. Nothing more was done, and the boy was born, as I have stated, early in July. Only after this event, which naturally engrossed the parents' attention, did the mistake into which they had fallen come to be discovered. As a matter of form, and to avoid doubts in the future, Captain F. wrote for the official certificate of Sir R.'s death. When it came, it came as a thunderbolt. Sir R. had been residing in a small Russian town near the frontier; he was interested, I understood, in some business there. The servant to whom I have referred was an uneducated man and could not write; he had picked up a little French but spoke no Russian. Wishing to inform Mrs F. of what had occurred, he had recourse to a professional letter-writer, who perhaps knew as little French, or almost as little, as himself, and was entirely ignorant of English. The servant gave the dates I have set down—6th June in the first letter, the 12th in the second. The letter-writer put them down; and Mrs F. read and immediately accepted them. It did not cross her mind or Captain F.'s that the dates used were the ordinary Russian dates—were in fact 'Old Style,' and consequently twelve days behind the reckoning of Germany or of England. They might have been put on inquiry by the long interval between the date of the death as it was given and the receipt of the news; in their excitement they paid no heed to it, and it did not occur either to Madame de Kries or to myself to raise the

question. Indeed, who thinks of the 'Old Style' at this period of the world's history? Besides, I did not know at that time, and I do not think that Madame de Kries did, where the first letter came from; Mrs F. said nothing about it. But when the certificate arrived—about the middle of July, as I understood—the mistake was clear; for a note in the official's hand translated the dates into 'New Style' for the benefit of the foreigners to whom he was supplying the document. Sir R. E., first reported dead on 6th June 'Old Style,' otherwise 18th June 'New Style,' had actually died on the 12th 'Old Style,' or 24th 'New Style.'

"I have always thought this one of the most perverse little incidents which I have met with in the course of my life, and I think it such still, when I consider how easily it might have done no harm, and how serious, and indeed irreparable, its actual consequences were. The mistake as to the date of death was the first source of confusion, since it caused Mrs F.'s wedding to take place while her husband, Sir R., had still a day to live. But this error would not in itself have proved fatal, since there would still have been time to repeat the ceremony and make a valid marriage of it before the birth of the child. Here the misapprehension about the 'Old Style' came in. Led to believe that, although Sir R. lived six days longer than was originally reported, yet none the less he died on 12th June, the F.'s did not have the ceremony repeated. But he died, in fact, on the 24th as his wife reckoned time, and her wedding to Captain F. on the 23rd was an idle and useless form. When the discovery was made, the boy was born—and born out of lawful wedlock.

"What did they do then? I was pardonably interested in the matter, and inquired of Madame de Kries. She was reticent, but I extracted from her the information that they were hurriedly married again. One could laugh if the matter had not been so terribly serious to them and to their boy. For by now those events had actually happened, and Mrs F. was not indeed in possession of but next in succession to a considerable estate and an ancient title. Marrying again could not mend the matter. What else they did to mend or try to mend it, Madame de Kries professed not to know. I myself do not know either. There is only one thing to say.

They could not alter the date of the death ; they could not alter the date of the wedding ; perhaps it would seem rather more possible to alter the date of the birth. At any rate, that is no business of mine. I have set the story down because it seemed a curious and interesting episode, but it is nothing to me who succeeds or ought to succeed to this or that title or estate. For my own part, I am inclined to hope that the baby's prospects in life will not be wrecked by the absurd Russian habit of using the ' Old Style.'

" To return to serious questions, the customs-barrier between——"

Mr Jenkinson Neeld laid down his friend's Journal and leant back in his chair.

" Really ! " he murmured to himself. " Really, really ! "

Frowning in a perplexed fashion, he pushed the manuscript aside and twiddled the blue pencil between his fingers. The customs-barrier of which Josiah Cholderton was about to speak had no power to interest him. The story which he had read interested him a good deal ; it was an odd little bit of human history, a disastrous turn of human fortunes. Besides, Mr Neeld knew his London. He shook his head at the Journal reprovingly, rose from his chair, went to his book-case, and took down a *Peerage*. A reminiscence was running in his head. He turned to the letter T (Ah, those hollowly discreet, painfully indiscreet initials of Josiah Cholderton's ! Mysteries perhaps in Baxton, Yorks., but none in Pall Mall !) and searched the pages. This was the entry at which his finger stopped—or rather part of the entry, for the volume had more to say on the family than it is needful either to believe or to repeat :

" Tristram of Blent—Adelaide Louisa Aimée, in her own right Baroness—23rd in descent, the barony descending to heirs general. Born 17th December 1853. Married first Sir Randolph Edge, Bart.—no issue. Secondly, Captain Henry Vincent Fitzhubert (late Scots Guards), died 1877. Issue—one son (and heir) Hon. Henry Austen Fitzhubert Tristram, born 20th July 1875. The name of Tristram was assumed in lieu of Fitzhubert by Royal Licence 1884. Seat—Blent Hall, Devon——"

Here Mr Neeld laid down the book. He had seen what

he wanted, and had no further concern with the ancestry, the ramifications, the abodes or possessions of the Tristrams of Blent. To him who knew, the entry itself was expressive in what it said and in what it omitted ; read in conjunction with Josiah Cholderton's Journal it was yet more eloquent. By itself it hinted a scandal — else why no dates for the marriages ? With the Journal it said something more. For the 20th is not " early in July." Yet Mr Neeld had never heard——! He shut the book hastily and put it back on the shelf. Returning to his desk, he took up the blue pencil. But on second thoughts this instrument did not content him. Scissors were to his hand ; with them he carefully cut out from the manuscript the whole account of Mr Cholderton's visit to Heidelberg (he would run no risks, and there was nothing important in it), dated it, marked it with the page to which it belonged in the Journal, and locked it away in a drawer.

He felt resentful toward his dead friend Josiah Cholderton. If there be a safe pastime, one warranted to lead a man into no trouble and to entangle him in no scandals, it would seem to lie in editing the Journal of a Member of Parliament, a Commercial Delegate, an Inventor of the Hygroxeric Method of Dressing Wool. Josiah Cholderton had—not quite for the first time—played him false. But never so badly as this before !

" Good gracious me ! " he muttered. " The thing is nothing more nor less than an imputation on the legitimacy of the son and heir ! "

That same afternoon he went over to the Imperium to vote at the election of members. It struck him as one of the small coincidences of life that among the candidates who faced the ballot was a Colonel Wilmot Edge, R.E.

" Any relation, I wonder ? " mused Mr Neeld as he dropped in an affirmative ball. But it may be added, since not even the secrets of club ballots are to be held sacred, that he bestowed one of a different sort on a certain Mr William Iver, who was described as a " Contractor," and whose name was familiar and conspicuous on the hoardings that screened new buildings in London, and was consequently objectionable to Mr Neeld's fastidious mind.

"I don't often blackball," he remarked to Lord Southend as they were sitting down to whist, "but, really, don't you think the Imperium should maintain—er—a certain level?"

"Iver's a devilish rich fellow and not a bad fellow either," grunted my lord.

CHAPTER II

Mr Cholderton's Imp

YES, madame, an elegant and spacious residence, Filton Park. The photo? Here it is, madame. And Notts is a very eligible county—socially speaking, remarkably eligible; I've sent several families to Notts. That photo, madame? Hatchley Manor, in Sussex. Yes, good position—a trifle low perhaps—I have heard complaints of —er—effluvium from the river—I'm anxious to give you perfect satisfaction, madame. It wouldn't pay me not to. I want you to come back, madame, another summer. I play for the break, if I may so put it—I beg your pardon! Yes, Birdcup is really a palatial residence—Hants, yes—a beautiful county. But between ourselves, madame, his lordship is a little hard to deal with. Dilapidations I refer to, yes—his lordship is exacting as to dilapidations. On the whole, I should prefer to recommend Winterhurst—near Maidstone—a pleasant town, Maidstone, and the clergy, I'm informed, extremely active and sympathetic."

"It's a very ugly house," remarked Madame Zabriska, throwing away the photograph of Winterhurst with a gesture of decided refusal.

Mr Sloyd stroked his sleek hair and smiled deprecatingly.

"With residences as with—er—ladies, beauty is only skin deep," said he. "A thoroughly modern residence, madame—hot and cold—south aspect." He stopped suddenly, perceiving that the queer dark little woman in the big chair was laughing at him. "I don't intend to convey," he resumed with dignity, "that the mansion is hot and cold, but the bathrooms——"

"Oh, I know," she interrupted, her great black eyes still deriding him, while her thin face was screwed up into seriousness, as she regarded Mr Sloyd's blameless garments of springtime grey, his black-and-white tie, his hair so very sleek, his drooping moustache, and his pink cheeks. She had taken his measure as perfectly as the tailor himself, and

was enjoying the counterfeit presentment of a real London dandy who came to her in the shape of a house-agent. "I don't want a big place," she explained in English, with a foreign touch about it. "There's only myself and my uncle, Major Duplay—he'll be in directly, I expect—and we've no more money than we want, Mr Sloyd."

Sloyd's eyes wandered round the large and handsome sitting-room in Berridge's Hotel, where he found his client established.

"Oh, it doesn't matter for a few days," she added, detecting his idea and smiling again.

This explanation of her position had the effect of making Sloyd's manner rather less florid and his language less flowery.

"Among second-class but eminently genteel residences," he began, "I could confidently recommend——"

"Where's this?" she interrupted, picking up another photograph, and regarding it with apparent liking. Looking at the foot, she read aloud, "Merrion Lodge, property of the Right Honourable Baroness Tristram of Blent." She looked up sharply at Sloyd.

"Ye-es, ye-es," said Sloyd, without much enthusiasm. "A very pretty neighbourhood—a few miles from Blentmouth—rising place, Blentmouth. And it's a cheap house—small, you see, and old-fashioned."

"Not hot and cold?" she asked with apparent innocence.

Sloyd smiled uncomfortably. "I could ascertain all that for you, madame."

He waited for her to speak again, but she had turned thoughtful as she sat fingering the photograph. Presently she smiled again and said, "Yes, find out about Merrion Lodge for me, Mr Sloyd."

He began to gather up his pictures and papers.

"Is Baron Tristram alive?" she asked suddenly.

Sloyd recovered his air of superiority.

"Her ladyship is a peeress in her own right," he explained.

"She's not married then?"

"A widow, madame."

"And wasn't her husband Baron Tristram?"

"Her husband would not have been Lord—excuse me, madame, we say Lord—Tristram of Blent. Her son will

succeed to the title, of course. The family reside at Blent Hall, only a few hundred yards from Merrion Lodge, a picturesque mansion in the valley. The Lodge, you perceive, stands high."

"I don't understand the family arrangements," remarked Madame Zabriska, "but I dare say I shall learn it all if I go."

"If you had a *Peerage*, madame——" he suggested, being himself rather vague about the mysteries of a barony by writ.

"I'll get one from the waiter presently. Good morning, Mr Sloyd."

Sloyd was making his bow when the door opened and a man came in. He was tall, erect, and good-looking. Both air and manner were youthful, although perhaps with a trace of artifice; he would pass for thirty-five on a casual glance, but not after a longer one.

"My uncle, Major Duplay," said the little woman. "This is Mr Sloyd, who's come about the house, uncle."

Duplay greeted the house-agent with grave courtesy, and entered into conversation with him, while Madame Zabriska, relapsed again into an alert silence, watched the pair.

The last thing that Madame Zabriska—the style sat oddly on her child-like face and figure, but Mina Zabriska at the age of twenty-eight had been a widow three years—desired to do was harm; the thing she best loved to make was mischief. The essence of mischief lay for her—perhaps for everybody—in curiosity; it was to put people in the situations in which they least expected to find themselves, and to observe how they comported themselves therein. As for hurting their interests or even their feelings—no; she was certain that she did not want that; was she not always terribly sorry when that happened, as it sometimes, and quite unaccountably, did? She would weep then—but for their misfortune, be it understood, not for any fault of hers. People did not always understand her; her mother had understood her perfectly, and consequently had never interfered with her ways. Mina loved a mystification too, and especially to mystify Uncle Duplay, who thought himself so clever—was clever indeed as men went, she acknowledged generously; but men did not go far. It would be fun to choose Merrion Lodge for her

summer home, first because her uncle would wonder why in the world she took it, and secondly because she had guessed that somebody might be surprised to see her there. So she laid her plan, even as she had played her tricks in the days when she was an odd little girl, and Mr Cholderton, not liking her, had with some justice christened her the Imp.

Major Duplay bowed Mr Sloyd to the door with the understanding that full details of Merrion Lodge were to be furnished in a day or two. Coming back to the hearthrug he spoke to his niece in French, as was the custom with the pair when they were alone.

"And now, dear Mina," said he, "what has made you set your mind on what seems distinctly the least desirable of these houses?"

"It's the cheapest, I expect, and I want to economize."

"People always do as soon as they've got any money," reflected Duplay in a puzzled tone. "If you were on half-pay as I am, you'd never want to do it."

"Well, I've another reason." This was already saying more than she had meant to say.

"Which you don't mean to tell me?"

"Certainly not."

With a shrug he took out his cigarette-case and handed it to her.

"You and your secrets!" he exclaimed good-humouredly. "Really, Mina, I more than earn my keep by the pleasure I give you in not telling me things. And then you go and do it!"

"Shan't this time," said Mr Cholderton's Imp, seeming not a day more than ten, in spite of her smoking cigarette and her smart costume.

"Luckily I'm not curious—and I can trust you to do nothing wrong."

"Well, I suppose so," she agreed with scornful composure. "Did you ever hear mother speak of a Mrs Fitzhubert?"

The Major smiled under his heavy moustache as he answered, "Never."

"Well, I have," said Mina with a world of significance. "I heard her first through the door," she added with a candid smile. "I was listening."

" You often were in those days."

" Oh, I am still—but on the inside of the door now. And she told me about it afterward of her own accord. But it wouldn't interest you, uncle."

" Not in its present stage of revelation," he agreed, with a little yawn.

" The funny old Englishman—you never saw him, did you ? —Mr Cholderton—he knew her. He rather admired her too. He was there when she rushed in and—— Never mind ! I was there too—such a guy ! I had corkscrew curls, you know, and a very short frock, and very long—other things. Oh, those frills !—And I suppose I really was the ugliest child ever born. Old Cholderton hated me—he'd have liked to box my ears, I know. But I think he was a little in love with Mrs Fitzhubert. Oh, I've never asked for that *Peerage* ! "

Major Duplay had resigned himself to a patient endurance of inadequate hints. His wits were not equal to putting together the pieces or conducting a sort of ' missing word,' or missing link, exercise to a triumphant issue. In time he would know all—supposing, that is, that there were really anything to know. Meanwhile he was not curious about other people's affairs ; he minded his own business. Keeping young occupied much of his time ; and then there was always the question of how it might prove possible to supplement the half-pay to which his years of service in the Swiss Army entitled him ; it was scanty, and but for his niece's hospitality really insufficient. He thought that he was a clever man, he had remained an honest man, and he saw no reason why Fortune should not some day make him a comfortable man ; she had never done so yet, having sent him into the world as the fifth child of a Protestant pastor in a French-speaking canton, and never having given him so much as a well-to-do relative (even Madame de Kries' villa was on a modest scale) until Mina married Adolf Zabriska and kept that gentleman's money although she had the misfortune to lose his company. His death seemed to Duplay at least no great calamity ; that he had died childless did not appear to have disappointed Mina and was certainly no ground of complaint on her uncle's part.

Presumably Mr Sloyd's inquiries elicited satisfactory in-

formation ; perhaps Mina was not hard to please. At all events, a week later she and the Major got out at Blentmouth station and found Sloyd himself waiting to drive with them to Merrion Lodge ; he had insisted on seeing them installed ; doubtless he was, as he put it, playing for the break again. He sat in the landau with his back to the horses and pointed out the features of interest on the road ; his couple of days' stay in the neighbourhood seemed to have made him an old inhabitant.

" Five hundred population five years ago," he observed, waving his hand over Blentmouth in patronizing encouragement. " Two thousand winter, three five summer months now—largely due to William Iver, Esquire, of Fairholme—we shall pass Fairholme directly—a wealthy gentleman who takes great interest in the development of the town."

It was all Greek to the Major, but he nodded politely. Mina was looking about her with keen eyes.

" That's Fairholme," Sloyd went on, as they came to a large and rather new house situated on the skirts of Blentmouth. " Observe the glass—those houses cost thousands of pounds—grows peaches all the year, they tell me. At this point, Madame Zabriska, we turn and pursue the road by the river." And so he ceased not to play guide-book till he landed them at the door of Merrion Lodge itself, after a slow crawl of a quarter of a mile uphill. Below them in the valley lay the little Blent, sparkling in the sunshine of a summer afternoon, and beyond the river, facing them on the opposite bank, no more perhaps than five hundred yards away, was Blent Hall. Mina ran to the parapet of the levelled terrace on which the Lodge stood, and looked down. Blent Hall made three sides of a square of old red-brick masonry, with a tower in the centre ; it faced the river, and broad gravel-walks and broader lawns of level close-shaven turf ran down to the water's edge.

" Among the minor seats of the nobility Blent is considered a very perfect example," she heard Sloyd say to the Major, who was unobtrusively but steadily urging him in the direction of the landau. She turned to bid him good-bye, and he came up to her, hat in hand.

" Thank you. I like the place," she said. " Do you—do

you think we shall make acquaintance with the people at Blent Hall ? "

" Her ladyship's in poor health, I hear, but I should imagine she would make an effort to call or at least send cards. Good-bye, madame."

Duplay succeeded in starting the zealous man on his homeward journey and then went into the house, Mina remaining still outside, engaged in the contemplation of her new surroundings, above all of Blent Hall, which was invested with a special interest for her eyes. It was the abode of Mrs Fitzhubert.

With a little start she turned to find a young man standing just on the other side of the parapet ; she had not noticed his approach till he had given a low cough to attract her attention. As he raised his hat her quick vision took him in as it were in a complete picture—the thin yet well-made body, the slight stoop in the shoulders, the high forehead bordered with thick dark hair growing in such a shape that the brow seemed to rise almost to a peak, a long nose, a sensitive mouth, a pointed chin, dark eyes with downward lids. The young man—she would have guessed him at twenty-two or three—had a complete composure of manner ; somehow she felt herself in the presence of the lord of the soil—an absurd thing to feel, she told herself.

" Madame Zabriska ? My mother, Lady Tristram, has sent me to bid you welcome in her name, but not to disturb you by coming in so soon after your journey. It is our tradition to welcome guests at the moment of their arrival."

He spoke rather slowly, in a pleasant voice, but with something in his air that puzzled Mina. It seemed like a sort of watchfulness—not a slyness (that would have fitted so badly with the rest of him), but perhaps one might say a wariness—whether directed against her or himself it was too soon for her even to conjecture.

Still rather startled, she forgot to express her thanks, and said simply :

" You're Mr Fitzhubert Tristram ? "

" Mr Tristram," he corrected her ; and she noticed now for the first time the slow-moving smile which soon became

his leading characteristic in her thoughts. It took such a time to spread, it seemed to feel its way ; but it was a success when it came. " I use my father's name only as a Christian name now. Tristram is my surname ; that also, if I may repeat myself, is one of our traditions."

" What, to change your names ? The men, I mean ? " she asked, laughing a little.

" For anybody in the direct line to take the name of Tristram —so that, in spite of the failure of male heirs from time to time, the Tristrams of Blent should always be Tristrams, you know, and not Fitzhuberts, or Leighs, or Merrions——"

" Merrion ? "

" My great-great—I forget how many greats—grandfather was a Merrion and——"

" Built this house ? "

" Oh, no—a house where this stands. The old house was burnt down in '95."

" As recently as that ? " she exclaimed in surprise.

" 1795," he explained, " and this house was run up then."

Mina felt that there was here a touch of pride ; with a more complete mastery of idiomatic English she might have called it ' swagger.' Nothing counted that was less than a century old, it seemed, and he spoke of a house of a hundred years' standing as she might of a wooden shanty. Decidedly he was conscious of his position—over-conscious.

" I'm glad it was run up in time for us to take it," she said, thinking she would try the effect of a little chaff.

The effect was nothing ; Harry Tristram took no notice of the remark.

" I see," he observed, " from your calling me Fitzhubert that you've been looking up our recent history."

" Oh, just what there is in the *Peerage*." Her look was mischievous now, but she restrained herself from any hint of special knowledge. " I'll tell you as much of ours some day."

She broke into a laugh, and then, carried away by the beauty of the scene, the river and the stately peaceful old house by it, she stretched out her hands toward Blent Hall, exclaiming :

" But we haven't anything like that in our history ! "

He turned to look with her, and stood in silence for a minute or two. Then he spoke softly.

" Yes, I love it," he said.

She glanced at him ; his eyes were tender. Turning, he saw her glance. In a moment he seemed to veil his eyes and to try to excuse the sentimental tone of his remark by a matter-of-fact comment :

" But of course a man comes to like a place when he's been accustomed to think of it as his home for all his life past and to come."

" What would you do if you lost it ? " she asked.

" I've no intention of losing it," he answered, laughing, but looking again from her and toward his home. " We've had it six hundred years ; we shan't lose it now, I think."

" No, I suppose not." He was holding out his hand. " Good-bye, Mr Tristram. May I come and thank your mother ? "

" Oh, but she'll come here, if she's well enough."

" I'll save her the journey up the hill."

He bowed in courteous acceptance of her offer as he shook hands.

" You see the foot-bridge over the river there ? There's a gate at each end, but the gates are never locked, so you can reach us from the road that way if you're walking. If you want to drive, you must go a quarter of a mile higher up, just below the Pool. Good-bye, Madame Zabriska."

Mina watched him all the way down the hill. He had made an impression on her—an intellectual impression, not a sentimental one. There was nothing of the boy about him, unless it were in that little flourish over the antiquity of his house and its surroundings ; even that might be the usual thing—she had not seen enough of his class to judge. There was, too, that love of the place which he had shown. Lastly, there was the odd air of wariness and watching ; such it seemed to her, and it consented to seem nothing else.

" I wonder," she thought, " if he knows anything about Mrs Fitzhubert—and I wonder if it would make any difference to him ! " Memory carried her back in an instant to the moment when she, Mr Cholderton's Imp, heard that beautiful woman cry, " Think of the difference it makes, the enormous

difference ! " She drew in her breath in a sudden gasp. An idea had flashed into her mind, showing her for the first time the chance of a situation which had never yet crossed her thoughts.

" Good gracious, is it possible that he couldn't keep it, or that his mother couldn't give it to him, all the same ? "

CHAPTER III

On Guard

HARRY TRISTRAM was just on twenty-three; to others, and to himself too, perhaps (if a man himself can attain any clear view), he seemed older. Even the externals of his youth had differed from the common run. Sent to school like other boys, he had come home from Harrow one Easter for the usual short holiday. He had never returned; he had not gone to the University; he had been abroad a good deal, travelling and studying, but always in his mother's company. It was known that she was in bad health; it was assumed that either she was very exacting or he very devoted, since to separate him from her appeared impossible. Yet those who observed them together saw no imperiousness on her part and no excess of sentiment on his. Friendliness based on a thorough sympathy of mind was his attitude if his demeanour revealed it truly; while Lady Tristram was to her son as she was to all the world at this time, a creature of feelings now half cold and of moods that reflected palely the intense impulses of her youth. But a few years over forty, she grew faded and faint in mind, it seemed, as well as in body, and was no longer a merry comrade to the boy who never left her. Yet he did not wish to leave her. To her, indeed, he was not a boy, and nobody about the place regarded him as other than a man. He had been actually and effectively master of the house for years, just as he was master of his own doings, of his friendships, recreations, and pursuits. And he had managed all well, except that he was not thought to be very happy or to get much enjoyment from his life. That was just an idea he gave of himself, and gave involuntarily—in spite of taking his fair share in the amusements of the neighbourhood, and holding his own well in its sports and athletics. But he was considered cold and very reserved. Had Mina Zabriska remembered this use of 'reserve,' perhaps she would have employed the word instead of 'wariness.' Or, perhaps, if his acquaintances had looked more keenly, they

would have come over to Mina's side and found her term the more accurate. She spoke from a fresher and sharper impression of him.

His childhood at least had been happy, while Lady Tristram was still the bewilderingly delightful companion who had got into so much hot water and made so many people eager to get in after her. Joy lasted with her as long as health did, and her health began to fail only when her son approached fifteen. Another thing happened about then, which formed the prelude to the most vivid scene in the boy's life. Lady Tristram was not habitually a religious woman ; that temper of mind was too abstract for her ; she moved among emotions and images, and had small dealings with meditation or spiritual conceptions. But happening to be in a mood that laid her open to the influence, she heard in London one day a sermon preached by a young man famous at the time, a great searcher of fashionable hearts. She drove straight from the church (it was a Friday morning) to Paddington and took the first train home. Harry was there—back from school for his holiday—and she found him in the smoking-room, weighing a fish which he had caught in the pool that the Blent forms above the weir. There and then she fell on her knees on the floor and poured forth to him the story of that Odyssey of hers which had shocked London society and is touched upon in Mr Cholderton's Journal. He listened amazed, embarrassed, puzzled up to a point ; a boy's normal awkwardness was raised to its highest pitch ; he did not want to hear his mother call herself a wicked woman ; and anyhow it was a long while ago, and he did not understand it all very well. The woman lifted her eyes and looked at him ; she was caught by the luxury of confession, of humiliation, of offering her back to the whip. She told him he was not her heir—that he would not be Tristram of Blent. For a moment she laid her head on the floor at his feet. She heard no sound from him, and presently looked up at him again. His embarrassment had gone ; he was standing rigidly still, his eyes gazing out toward the river, his forehead wrinkled in a frown. He was thinking. She went on kneeling there, saying no more, staring at her son. It was characteristic of her that she did not risk diminishing the effectiveness of the scene, or the

tragedy of her avowal, by explaining the perverse accident owing to which her fault had entailed such an aggravation of evil. Harry learnt that later.

Later—and in a most different sort of interview. From the first Harry had no thought of surrender ; his mother had none either as soon as she had forgotten her preacher. The discussion was resumed after a week (Lady Tristram had spent the interval in bed) on a business footing. She found in him the same carelessness of the world and its obligations that there was in herself, but found it carried to the point of scorn and allied to a tenacity of purpose and a keenness of vision which she had never owned. Not a reproach escaped him—less, she thought, from generosity than because he chose to concentrate his mind on something useful. It was no use lamenting the past ; it might be possible to undo it for all practical purposes. The affair was never again referred to between them except as a factor recommending or dictating some course of action ; its private side—its revelation of her and its effect (or what might have been its effect) on his feelings toward her—was never spoken of. Lady Tristram thought that the effect was nothing, and the revelation not very surprising to her son. He accepted without argument her own view—that she had done nothing very strange but had fallen on very bad luck. But he told her at once that he was not going back to Harrow. She understood ; she agreed to be watched, she abdicated her rule, she put everything in his hands and obeyed him.

Thus, at fifteen, Harry Tristram took up his burden and seemed to take up his manhood too. He never wavered ; he always assumed that right and justice were on his side, that he was not merely justified in holding his place but bound in duty to keep it. Such practical steps as could be taken were taken. The confederates set no limit to their preparations against danger and their devices to avoid detection. If lies were necessary, they would lie ; where falsification was wanted, they falsified. There was no suspicion ; not a hint of it had reached their ears. Things were so quiet that Lady Tristram often forgot the whole affair ; her son watched always, his eyes keen for a sight, his ear down to the earth for a sound, of danger. No security relaxed his vigilance, but his vigilance

became so habitual, so entered into him, that his mother ceased to notice it and it became a second nature to himself. That it might miss nothing, it was universal; the merest stranger came within its ken. He watched all mankind lest some one among men should be seeking to take his treasure from him. Mr Cholderton's Imp had not used her eyes in vain; but Harry's neighbours, content to call him reserved, had no idea that there was anything in particular that he had to hide.

There was one little point which, except for his persuasion of his own rectitude, might have seemed to indicate an uneasy conscience, but was in fact only evidence of a natural dislike to having an unwelcome subject thrust under his notice. About a year after the disclosure Lady Tristram had a letter from Mr Gainsborough. This gentleman had married her cousin, and the cousin, a woman of severe principles, had put an end to all acquaintance in consequence of the 'Odyssey.' She was dead, and her husband proposed to renew friendly relations, saying that his daughter knew nothing of past differences and was anxious to see her kinsfolk. The letter was almost gushing, and Lady Tristram, left to herself, would have answered it in the same kind; for while she had pleased herself she bore no resentment against folk who had blamed her. Moreover Gainsborough was poor, and somebody had told her that the girl was pleasant; she pitied poverty and liked being kind to pleasant people.

"Shall we invite them to stay for a week or two?" she had asked.

"Never," he said. "They shall never come here. I don't want to know them, I won't see them." His face was hard, angry, and even outraged at the notion.

His mother said no more. If the barony and Blent departed from Harry, on Lady Tristram's death they would go to Cecily Gainsborough. If Harry had his way, that girl should not even see his darling Blent. If distrust of his mother entered at all into his decision, if he feared any indiscreet talk from her, he gave no hint of it. It was enough that the girl had some odious pretensions which he could and would defeat but could not ignore—pretensions for his mind, in her own she had none.

The sun had sunk behind the tower, and Lady Tristram sat in a low chair by the river, enjoying the cool of the evening. The Blent murmured as it ran ; the fishes were feeding ; the midges were out to feed, but they did not bite Lady Tristram ; they never did ; the fact had always been a comfort to her, and may perhaps be allowed here to assume a mildly allegorical meaning. If the cool of the evening may do the same, it will serve very well to express the stage of life and of feeling to which no more than the beginning of middle age had brought her. It was rather absurd, but she did not want to do or feel very much more ; and it seemed as though her wishes were to be respected. A certain distance from things marked her now ; only Harry was near to her, only Harry's triumph was very important. She had outrun her vital income and mortgaged future years ; if foreclosure threatened, she maintained her old power of taking no heed of disagreeable things, however imminent. She was still very handsome and wished to go on being that to the end ; fortunately fragility had always been her style and always suited her.

Harry leant his elbow on a great stone vase which stood on a pedestal and held a miniature wilderness of flowers.

" I lunched at Fairholme," he was saying. " The paint's all wet still, of course, and the doors stick a bit, but I liked the family. He's genuine, she's homely, and Janie's a good girl. They were very civil."

" I suppose so."

" Not overwhelmed," he added, as though wishing to correct a wrong impression which yet might reasonably have arisen.

" I didn't mean that. I've met Mr Iver, and he wasn't at all overwhelmed. Mrs Iver was—out—when I called, and I was—out—when she called." Lady Tristram was visibly, although not ostentatiously, allowing for the prejudices of a moral middle-class.

" Young Bob Broadley was there—you know who I mean ? At Mingham Farm, up above the Pool."

" I know—a handsome young man."

" I forgot he was handsome. Of course you know him then ! What a pity I'm not handsome, mother ! "

" Oh, you've the air, though," she observed contentedly. " Is he after Janie Iver ? "

" So I imagine. I'm not sure that I'm not too. Have I any chance against Bob Broadley ? "

She did not seem to take him seriously.

" They wouldn't look at Mr Broadley." (She was pleasantly punctilious about all titles and courteous methods of reference or address.) " Janie Iver's a great heiress."

" And what about me ? " he insisted, as he lit his pipe and sat down opposite her.

" You mean it, Harry ? "

" There's no reason why I shouldn't marry, is there ? "

" Why, you must marry, of course. But——"

" We can do the blue blood business enough for both."

" Yes, I didn't mean that."

" You mean—am I at all in love with her ? "

" No, not quite. Oh, my dear Harry, I mean wouldn't you like to be in love a little with somebody ? You could do it after you marry, of course, and you certainly will if you marry now, but it's not so—so comfortable." She looked at him with a sort of pity : her feeling was that he gave himself no holidays.

He sat silent a moment seeming to consider some picture which her suggestion conjured up.

" No good waiting for that," was his conclusion. " Somehow if I married and had children, it would seem to make everything more settled." His great preoccupation was on him again. " We could do with some more money too," he added, " and, as I say, I'm inclined to like the girl."

" What's she like ? "

" What you call a fine girl—tall—well made——"

" She'll be fat some day, I expect."

" Straight features, broadish face, dark, rather heavy brows —you know the sort of thing."

" Oh, Harry, I hate all that ! "

" I don't ; I rather like it." He was smoking meditatively, and jerked out what he had to say between the puffs. " I shouldn't like to mortgage Blent," he went on a moment later.

" Mortgage Blent ? What for ? "

He raised a hand to ask to be heard out. " But I should like to feel that I could at any moment lay my hand on a big lump of ready money—say fifty, or even a hundred, thousand

pounds. I should like to be able to pull it out of my breeches' pocket and say, 'Take that and hold your tongue!'" He looked at her to see if she followed what was in his mind. "I think they'd take it," he ended. "I mean if things got as far as that, you know."

"You mean the Gainsboroughs?"

"Yes. Oh, anybody else would be cheaper than that. Fifty thousand would be better than a very doubtful case. But it would have to be done directly—before a word was heard about it. I should like to live with the cheque by me."

He spoke very simply, as another man might speak of being ready to meet an improvement-rate or an application from an impecunious brother.

"Don't you think it would be a good precaution?" he asked. Whether he meant the marriage, the cheque, or the lady, was immaterial; it came to the same thing.

"It's all very troublesome," Lady Tristram complained. "It really half spoils our lives, doesn't it, Harry? One always has to be worrying."

The smile whose movements had excited Mina Zabriska's interest made its appearance on Harry's face. He had never been annoyed by his mother's external attitude toward the result of her own doings, but he was often amused at it.

"Why do you smile?" she asked innocently.

"Well, worrying's a mild term," he explained evasively. "It's my work in the world, you know—or it seems as if it was going to be."

"You'd better think about it," Lady Tristram concluded, not wishing to think about it any more herself. "You wouldn't tell Mr Iver anything about the difficulty, would you?" "The difficulty," had become her usual way of referring to their secret.

"Not a word. I'm not called upon to justify my position to Iver." No shadow of doubt softened the clearness of Harry's conviction on this point.

He rose, filled his pipe again, and began to walk up and down. He was at his old game, counting chances, one by one, every chance, trying to eliminate risks, one by one,

every risk, so that at last he might take his ease and say without fear of contradiction, "Here sits Tristram of Blent." To be thus was—something; but to be safely thus was so much more that it did not seem to him a great thing to carry out the plan which he had suggested to Lady Tristram. To be sure, he was not in love with anybody else, which makes a difference, though it is doubtful whether it would have made any to him. Had the question arisen at that moment he would have said that nothing could make any difference.

"Did you go up to the Lodge, Harry?" his mother called to him as one of his turns brought him near her.

"Oh, yes; I forgot to tell you. I did, and I found Madame Zabriska having a look at us from the terrace, so I had a little talk with her. I didn't see the uncle."

"What's she like?" This was a favourite question of Lady Tristram's.

Harry paused a moment, looking for a description.

"Well, if you can imagine one needle with two very large eyes, you'd get some idea of her. She's sharp, mother—mind and body. Pleasant enough though. She's coming to see you, so you needn't bother to go up." He added with a air of impatience, "She's been hunting in the *Peerage*."

"Of course she would; there's nothing in that."

"No, I suppose not," he admitted almost reluctantly.

"I can't help thinking I've heard the name before—not Zabriska, but the uncle's."

"Duplay, isn't it? I never heard it."

"Well, I can't remember anything about it, but it sounds familiar. I'm confusing it with something else, I suppose. They look like being endurable, do they?"

"Oh, yes, as people go," he answered, resuming his walk.

If a determination to keep for yourself what according to your own conviction belongs by law to another makes a criminal intent—and that irrespective of the merits of the law—it would be hard to avoid classing Lady Tristram and her son as criminals in contemplation, if not yet in action. And so considered they afforded excellent specimens of two kinds of criminals which a study of assize courts reveals—the criminal

who drifts and the criminal who plans ; the former usually termed by counsel and judge " unhappy," the latter more sternly dubbed " dangerous." Lady Tristram had always drifted and was drifting still ; Harry had begun to plan at fifteen and still was busy planning. One result of this difference was that whereas she was hardly touched or affected in character he had been immensely influenced. In her and to her the whole thing seemed almost accidental, a worry, as she put it, and not much more ; with him it was the governing fact in life, and had been the force most potent in moulding him. The trouble came into her head when something from outside put it there ; it never left his brain. And she had no adequate conception of what it was to him. Even his scheme of marrying Janie Iver and his vivid little phrase about living with the cheque by him failed to bring it home to her. This very evening, as soon as he was out of sight, both he and his great question were out of the mind of the woman who had brought both him and it into existence. There are people who carry the doctrine of free-will so far in their own persons as to take the liberty of declining to allow causes to work on and in them what are logically, morally, and on every other ground conceivable, their necessary effects ; reasoning from what they have done to what they must be, from what they have been responsible for to what they must feel, breaks down ; they are arbitrary, unconditioned, themselves as it were accidental. With this comes a sort of innocence, sometimes attractive, sometimes uncommonly exasperating to the normal man.

So Lady Tristram went back to her novel, and Harry walked by the river, moodily meditating and busily scheming. Meanwhile Mina Zabriska had flown to the library at Merrion Lodge, and, finding books that had belonged to a legal member of the family in days gone by, was engaged in studying the law relating to the succession to lands and titles in England. She did not make quick progress. Nevertheless in a day or two she had reached a point when she was bubbling over with curiosity and excitement ; she felt that she could not go on sitting opposite Major Duplay at meals without giving him at least a hint or two of the wonderful state of things on which she had hit, and without asking him to consider the facts and

to have a look at the books which were so puzzling and exercising her brain. Yet Harry Tristram, wary sentinel as he was, did not dream of any attack or scent any danger from the needle with two very large eyes, as he had called the lady at Merrion Lodge.

CHAPTER IV

She could an' she would

IN spite of Mrs Iver's secret opinion that people with strange names were likely to be strange themselves, and that, for all she saw, foreigners were—not fools, as Dr Johnson's friend thought—but generally knaves, an acquaintance was soon made between Fairholme and Merrion Lodge. Her family was against Mrs Iver ; her husband was boundlessly hospitable, Janie was very sociable. The friendship grew and prospered. Mr Iver began to teach the Major to play golf. Janie took Mina Zabriska out driving in the highest dogcart on the countryside : they would go along the road by the river, and get out perhaps for a wander by the Pool, or even drive higher up the valley and demand tea from Bob Broadley at his pleasant little place—half farm, half manor-house—at Mingham, three miles above the Pool. Matters moved so quick that Mina understood in a week why Janie found it pleasant to have a companion under whose ægis she could drop in at Mingham ; in little more than a fortnight she began to understand why her youthful uncle (the Major was very young now) grunted unsympathetically when she observed that the road to Mingham was the prettiest in the neighbourhood. The Imp was accumulating other people's secrets, and was accordingly in a state of high satisfaction.

The situation developed fast, and for the time at least Janie Iver was heroine and held the centre of the stage. A chance of that state of comfort which was his remaining and modest ambition had opened before the Major—and the possibility of sharing it with a congenial partner : the Major wasted no time in starting his campaign. Overtures from Blent, more stately but none the less prompt, showed that Harry Tristram had not spoken idly to his mother. And what about Bob Broadley ? He seemed to be out of the running, and indeed to have little inclination, or not enough courage, to press forward. Yet the drives to Mingham went on. Mina was

puzzled. She began to observe the currents in the Fairholme household. Iver was for Harry, she thought, though he maintained a dignified show of indifference ; Mrs Iver—the miraculous occurring in a fortnight, as it often does—was at least very much taken with the Major. Bob Broadley had no friend, unless in Janie herself. And Janie was inscrutable by virtue of an open pleasure in the attention of all three gentlemen and an obvious disinclination to devote herself exclusively to any one of them. She could not flirt with Harry Tristram, because he had no knowledge of the art, but she accepted his significant civilities. She did flirt with the Major, who had many years' experience of the pastime. And she was kind to Bob Broadley, going to see him, as has been said, sending him invitations, and seeming in some way to be fighting against his own readiness to give up the battle before it was well begun. But it is hard to help a man who will not help himself ; on the other hand, it is said to be amusing sometimes.

They all met at Fairholme one afternoon, Harry appearing unexpectedly as the rest were at tea on the lawn. This was his first meeting with the Major. As he greeted that gentleman, even more when he shook hands with Bob, there was a touch of regality in his manner ; the reserve was prominent, and his prerogative was claimed. Very soon he carried Janie off for a solitary walk in the shrubberies. Mina enjoyed her uncle's frown and chafed at Bob's self-effacement ; he had been talking to Janie when Harry calmly took her away. The pair were gone half an hour, and conversation flagged. They reappeared, Janie looking rather excited, Harry almost insolently calm, and sat down side by side. The Major walked across and took a vacant seat on the other side of Janie. The slightest look of surprise showed on Harry Tristram's face. A duel began. Duplay had readiness, suavity, volubility, a trick of flattering deference ; on Harry's side were a stronger suggestion of power and an assumption, rather attractive, that he must be listened to. Janie liked this air of his, even while she resented it ; here, in his own county at least, a Tristram of Blent was somebody. Bob Broadley was listening to Iver's views on local affairs ; he was not in the fight at all, but he was covertly watching it. Perhaps Iver watched too, but it was not easy to penetrate the thoughts of that astute man of

business. The fortune of battle seemed to incline to Harry's side ; the Major was left out of the talk for minutes together. More for fun than from any loyalty to her kinsman, Mina rose and walked over to Harry.

" Do take me to see the greenhouses, Mr Tristram," she begged. " You're all right with uncle, aren't you, Janie ? "

Janie nodded rather nervously. After a pause of a full half-minute, Harry Tristram rose without a word and began to walk off ; it was left for Mina to join him in a hurried little run.

" Oh, wait for me, anyhow," she cried, with a laugh.

They walked on some way in silence.

" You're not very conversational, Mr Tristram. I suppose you're angry with me ? "

He turned and looked at her. Presently he began to smile, even more slowly, it seemed, than usual.

" I must see that my poor uncle has fair play—what do you call it ?—a fair show—mustn't I ? "

" Oh, that's what you meant, Madame Zabriska ? It wasn't the pleasure of my company ? "

" Do you know, I think you rather exaggerate the pleasure—no, not the pleasure, I mean the honour—of your company ? You were looking as if you couldn't understand how anybody could want to talk to uncle when you were there. But he's better-looking than you are, and much more amusing."

" I don't set up for a beauty or a wit either," Harry observed, not at all put out by the Imp's premeditated candour.

" No—and still she ought to want to talk to you ! Why ? Because you're Mr Tristram, I suppose ? " Mina indulged in a very scornful demeanour.

" It's very friendly of you to resent my behaviour on Miss Iver's behalf."

" There you are again ! That means she doesn't resent it ! I think you give yourself airs, Mr Tristram, and I should like——"

" To take me down a peg ? " he asked, in a tone of rather contemptuous amusement.

She paused a minute, and then nodded significantly.

" Exactly ; and to make you feel a little uncomfortable—not quite so sure of yourself and everything about you." Again

she waited a minute, her eyes set on his face and watching it keenly. " I wonder if I could," she ended slowly.

" Upon my word, I don't see how it's to be done." He was openly chaffing her now.

" Oh, I don't know that you're invulnerable," she said, with a toss of her head. " Don't defy me, Mr Tristram. I don't mind telling you that it would be very good for you if you weren't——"

" Appreciated ? " he suggested ironically.

" No ; I was going to say if you weren't Mr Tristram, or the future Lord Tristram of Blent."

If she had hoped to catch him off his guard, she was mistaken. Not a quiver passed over his face as he remarked :

" I'm afraid Providence can hardly manage that now, either for my good or for your amusement, Madame Zabriska, much as it might conduce to both."

The Imp loved fighting, and her blood was getting up. He was a good foe, but he did not know her power. He must not either—not yet, anyhow. If he patronized her much more, she began to feel that he would have to know it some day—not to his hurt, of course ; merely for the reformation of his manners.

" Meanwhile," he continued, as he lit a cigarette, " I'm not seriously disappointed that attentions paid to one lady fail to please another. That's not uncommon, you know. By the way, we're not on the path to the greenhouses ; but you don't mind that ? They were a pretext, no doubt ? Oh, I don't want to hurry back. Your uncle shall have his fair show. How well you're mastering English ! "

At this moment Mina hated him heartily ; she swore to humble him—before herself, not before the world, of course ; she would give him a fright anyhow—not now, but some day ; if her temper could not stand the strain better, it would be some day soon, though.

" You see," Harry's calm exasperating voice went on, " it's just possible that you're better placed at present as an observer of our manners than as a critic of them. I hope I don't exceed the limits of candour which you yourself indicated as allowable in this pleasant conversation of ours ? "

" Oh well, we shall see," she declared, with another nod.

The vague threat (for it seemed that or nothing) elicited a low laugh from Harry Tristram.

" We shall," he said. " And in the meantime a little sparring is amusing enough. I don't confess to a hit at present; do you, Madame Zabriska ? "

Mina did not confess, but she felt the hit all the same ; if she were to fight him, she must bring her reserves into action.

" By the way, I'm so sorry you couldn't see my mother when you called the other day. She's not at all well, unhappily. She really wants to see you."

" How very kind of Lady Tristram ! " There was kept for the mother a little of the sarcastic humility which was more appropriate when directed against the son. Harry smiled still as he turned round and began to escort her back to the lawn. The smile annoyed Mina ; it was a smile of victory. Well, the victory should not be altogether his.

" I want to see Lady Tristram very much," she went on, in innocent tones and with a face devoid of malice, "because I can't help thinking I must have seen her before—when I was quite a little girl."

" You've seen my mother before ? When and where ? "

" She was Mrs Fitzhubert, wasn't she ? "

" Yes, of course she was—before she came into the title."

" Well, a Mrs Fitzhubert used to come and see my mother long ago at Heidelberg. Do you know if your mother was ever at Heidelberg ? "

" I fancy she was—I'm not sure."

Still the Imp was very innocent, although the form of Harry's reply caused her inward amusement and triumph.

"My mother was Madame de Kries. Ask Lady Tristram if she remembers the name."

It was a hit for her at last, though Harry took it well. He turned quickly toward her, opened his lips to speak, repented, and did no more than give her a rather long and rather intense look. Then he nodded carelessly. " All right, I'll ask her," said he. The next moment he put a question. " Did you know about having met her before you came to Merrion ? "

" Oh well, I looked in the *Peerage* but it really didn't strike me till a day or two ago that it might be the same Mrs Fitzhubert. The name's pretty common, isn't it ? "

" No, it's very uncommon."

" Oh, I didn't know," murmured Mina apologetically ; but the glance which followed him as he turned away was not apologetic ; it was triumphant.

She got back in time to witness—to her regret (let it be confessed) she could not overhear—Janie's farewell to Bob Broadley. They had been friends from youth ; he was ' Bob ' to her, she was now to him ' Miss Janie.'

" You haven't said a word to me, Bob."

" I haven't had a chance ; you're always with the swells now."

" How can I help it, if—if nobody else comes ? "

" I really shouldn't have the cheek. Harry Tristram was savage enough with the Major—what would he have been with me ? "

" Why should it matter what he was ? "

" Do you really think that, Miss Janie ? " Bob was almost at the point of an advance.

" I mean—why should it matter to you ? "

The explanation checked the advance.

" Oh, I—I see. I don't know, I'm sure. Well then, I don't know how to deal with him."

" Well, good-bye."

" Good-bye, Miss Janie."

" Are you coming to see us again, ever ? "

" If you ask me, I——"

" And am I coming again to Mingham ? Although you don't ask me."

" Will you really ? "

" Oh, you do ask me ? When I ask you to ask me ! "

" Any day you'll——"

" No, I'll surprise you. Good-bye. Good-bye really."

The conversation, it must be admitted, sounds commonplace when verbally recorded. Yet he would be a despondent man who considered it altogether discouraging ; Mina did not think Janie's glances discouraging either. But Bob Broadley, a literal man, found no warrant for fresh hope in any of the not very significant words which he repeated to himself as he rode home up the valley of the Blent. He suffered under modesty ; it needed more than coquetry to convince him that he exercised

any attraction over the rich and brilliant (brilliance also is a matter of comparison) Miss Iver, on whose favour Mr Tristram waited and at whose side Major Duplay danced attendance.

" You're a dreadful flirt, Janie," said Mina, as she kissed her friend.

Janie was not a raw girl ; she was a capable young woman of two-and-twenty.

" Nonsense," she said rather crossly. " It's not flirting to take time to make up your mind."

" It looks like it, though."

" And I've no reason to suppose they've any one of them made up their minds."

" I should think you could do that for them pretty soon. Besides, uncle has, anyhow."

" I'm to be your aunt, am I ? "

" Oh, he's only an uncle by accident."

" Yes, I think that's true. Shall we have a drive soon ? "

" To Mingham ? Or to Blent Hall ? "

" Not Blent. I wait my lord's pleasure to see me."

" Yes, that's just how I feel about him," cried Mina eagerly.

" But all the same——"

" No, I won't hear a word of good about him. I hate him ! "

Janie smiled in an indulgent but rather troubled way. Her problem was serious ; she could not afford the Imp's pettish treatment of the world and the people in it. Janie had responsibilities—banks and buildings full of them—and a heart to please into the bargain. Singularly complicated questions are rather cruelly put before young women, who must solve them on peril of—— It would sound like exaggeration to say what.

There was Mrs Iver to be said good-bye to—plump, peaceful, proper Mrs Iver, whom nothing had great power to stir save an unkindness and an unconventionality ; before either of these she bristled surprisingly.

" I hope you've all enjoyed this lovely afternoon," she said to Mina.

" Oh, yes, we have, Mrs Iver—not quite equally perhaps, but still——"

Mrs Iver sighed and kissed her.

" Men are always the difficulty, aren't they ? " said the Imp.

" Poor child, and you've lost yours ! "

" Yes, poor Adolf ! " There was a touch of duty in Mina's sigh. She had been fond of Adolf, but his memory was not a constant presence. The world for the living was Madame Zabriska's view.

" I'm so glad Janie's found a friend in you—and a wise one, I'm sure."

Mina did her best to look the part thus charitably assigned to her ; her glance at Janie was matronly, almost maternal.

" Not that I know anything about it," Mrs Iver pursued, following a train of thought obvious enough. " I hope she'll act for her happiness, that's all. There's the dear Major looking for you—don't keep him waiting, dear. How lucky he's your uncle—he can always be with you."

" Until he settles and makes a home for himself," smiled Mina irrepressibly ; the rejuvenescence—nay, the unbroken youth—of her relative appeared to her quaintly humorous, and it was her fancy to refer to him as she might to a younger brother.

There was Mr Iver to be said good-bye to.

" Come again soon—you're always welcome ; you wake us up, Madame Zabriska."

" You promised to say Mina ! "

" So I did, but my tongue's out of practice with young ladies' Christian names. Why, I call my wife ' Mother '—only Janie says I mustn't. Yes, come and cheer us up. I shall make the uncle a crack player before long. Mustn't let him get lazy and spend half the day over five-o'clock tea, though."

This was hardly a hint, but it was an indication of the trend of Mr Iver's thoughts. So it was a dangerous ball, and that clever little cricketer, the Imp, kept her bat away from it. She laughed ; that committed her to nothing—and left Iver to bowl again.

" It's quite a change to find Harry Tristram at a tea-party, though ! Making himself pleasant too ! "

" Not to me," observed Mina decisively.

" You chaffed him, I expect. He stands a bit on his dignity. Ah well, he's young, you see."

" No, he chaffed me. Oh, I think I—I left off even, you know."

" They get a bit spoilt." He seemed to be referring to the aristocracy. " But there's plenty of stuff in him, or I'm much mistaken. He's a born fighter, I think."

" I wonder ! " said Mina, her eyes twinkling again.

Finally there was the Major to be walked home with—not a youthful triumphant Major, but a rather care-worn, undisguisedly irritated one. If Mina wanted somebody to agree with her present mood about Harry Tristram, her longing was abundantly gratified. The Major roundly termed him an overbearing young cub, and professed a desire—almost an intention—to teach him better manners. This coincidence of views was a sore temptation to the Imp ; to resist it altogether would seem superhuman.

" I should like to cut his comb for him," growled Duplay.

Whatever the metaphor adopted, Mina was in essential agreement. She launched on an account of how Harry had treated her : they fanned one another's fires, and the flames burnt merrily.

Mina's stock of discretion was threatened with complete consumption. From open denunciations she turned to mysterious hintings.

" I could bring him to reason if I liked," she said.

" What, make him fall in love with you ? " cried Duplay, with a surprise not very complimentary.

" Oh no," she laughed ; " better than that—by a great deal."

He eyed her closely : probably this was only another of her whimsical tricks, with which he was very familiar ; if he showed too much interest she would laugh at him for being taken in. But she had hinted before to-day's annoyances ; she was hinting again. He had yawned at her hints till he became Harry Tristram's rival ; he was ready to be eager now, if only he could be sure that they pointed to anything more than folly or delusion.

" Oh, my dear child," he exclaimed, " you mustn't talk nonsense. We mayn't like him, but what in the world could you do to him ? "

" I don't want to hurt him, but I should like to make him sing small."

They had just reached the foot of the hill. Duplay waved

his arm across the river toward the hall. Blent looked strong and stately.

" That's a big task, my dear," he said, recovering some of his good-humour at the sight of Mina's waspish little face. " I fancy it'll need a bigger man than you to make Tristram of Blent sing small." He laughed at her indulgently. " Or than me either, I'm afraid," he added, with a ruefulness that was not ill-tempered. " We must fight him in fair fight, that's all."

" He doesn't fight fair," she cried angrily. The next instant she broke into her most malicious smile. " Tristram of Blent ! " she repeated. " Oh well——"

" Mina, dear, do you know you rather bore me ? If you mean anything at all——"

" I may mean what I like without telling you, I suppose ? "

" Certainly—but don't ask me to listen."

" You think it's all nonsense ? "

" I do, my dear," confessed the Major.

How far he spoke sincerely he himself could hardly tell. Perhaps he had an alternative in his mind : if she meant nothing, she would hold her peace and cease to weary him ; if she meant anything real, his challenge would bring it out. But for the moment she had fallen into thought.

" No, he doesn't fight fair," she repeated, as though to herself. She glanced at her uncle in a hesitating undecided way. " And he's abominably rude," she went on, with a sudden return of pettishness.

The Major's shrug expressed an utter exhaustion of patience, a scornful irritation, almost a contempt for her. She could not endure it ; she must justify herself, revenge herself at a blow on Harry for his rudeness and on her uncle for his scepticism. The triumph would be sweet ; she could not for the moment think of any seriousness in what she did. She could not keep her victory to herself ; somebody else now must look on at Harry's humiliation, at least must see that she had power to bring it about. With the height of malicious exultation she looked up at Duplay and said :

" Suppose he wasn't Tristram of Blent at all ? "

Duplay stopped short where he stood—on the slope of the hill above Blent itself.

" What ? Is this more nonsense ? "

" No, it isn't nonsense."

He looked at her steadily, almost severely. Under his regard her smile disappeared ; she grew uncomfortable.

" Then I must know more about it. Come, Mina, this is no trifle, you know."

" I shan't tell you any more," she flashed out, in a last effort of petulance.

" You must," he said calmly. " All you know, all you think. Come, we'll have it out now at once."

She followed like a naughty child. She could have bitten her tongue out, as the old phrase goes. Her feelings went round like a weathercock ; she was ashamed of herself, sorry for Harry—yes, and afraid of Harry. And she was afraid of Duplay too. She had run herself into something serious—that she saw ; something serious in which two resolute men were involved. She did not know where it would end. But now she could not resist. The youthful uncle seemed youthful no more ; he was old, strong, authoritative. He made her follow him, and he bade her speak.

She followed, like the naughty child she now seemed even to herself ; and presently, in the library, beside those wretched books of hers, her old law-books and her *Peerages*, reluctantly, stumblingly, sullenly, still like the naughty child who would revolt but dare not, she spoke. And when at last he let her go with her secret told, she ran up to her own room and threw herself on the bed, sobbing. She had let herself in for something dreadful. It was all her own fault—and she was very sorry.

Those were her two main conclusions.

Her whole behaviour was probably just what the gentleman to whom she owed her nickname would have expected and prophesied.

CHAPTER V

The First Round

WITHIN the last few days there were ominous rumours afloat as to Lady Tristram's health. It was known that she could see nobody and kept her room ; it was reported that the doctors (a specialist had been down from town) were looking very grave ; it was agreed that her constitution had not the strength to support a prolonged strain. There was sympathy—the neighbourhood was proud in its way of Lady Tristram—and there was the usual interest to which the prospect of a death and a succession gives rise. They canvassed Harry's probable merits and demerits, asking how he would fill the vacant throne, and, more particularly, whether he would be likely to entertain freely. Lavish hospitality at Blent would mean much to the neighbourhood, and if it were indeed the case (as was now prophesied in whispers) that Miss Iver of Fairholme was to be mistress at the Hall, there would be nothing to prevent the hospitalities from being as splendid as the mind of woman could conceive. There were spinster ladies in small villas at Blentmouth who watched the illness and the courtship as keenly as though they were to succeed the sick Lady Tristram and to marry the new Lord. Yet a single garden-party in the year would represent pretty accurately their personal stake in the matter. If you live on crumbs, a good big crumb is not to be despised.

Harry Tristram was sorry that his mother must die and that he must lose her ; the confederates had become close friends, and nobody who knew her intimately could help feeling that his life and even the world would be poorer by the loss of a real, if not striking, individuality. But neither he nor she thought of her death as the main thing ; it no more than ushered in the great event for which they had spent years preparing. And he was downright glad that she could see no visitors ; that fact saved him added anxieties, and spared her the need of being told about Mina Zabriska and warned to bear herself warily toward the daughter of Madame de Kries. Harry did not ask

his mother whether she remembered the name—the question was unnecessary ; nor did he tell his mother that one who had borne the name was at Merrion Lodge. He waited, vaguely expecting that trouble would come from Merrion, but entirely confident in his ability to fight, and worst, the tricky little woman whom he had not feared to snub ; and in his heart he thought well of her, and believed she had as little inclination to hurt him as she seemed to have power. His only active step was to pursue his attentions to Janie Iver.

Yet he was not happy about his attentions. He meant to marry the girl, and thought she would marry him. He did not believe that she was inclined to fall in love with him. He had no right to expect it, since he was not falling in love with her. But it hurt that terrible pride of his ; he was in a way disgusted with the part he had chosen, and humiliated to think that he might not be accepted for himself. A refusal would have hurt him incalculably ; such an assent as he counted upon would wound him somewhat too. He had keen eyes, and he had formed his own opinion about Bob Broadley. None the less, he held straight on his course ; and the spinster ladies were a little shocked to observe that Lady Tristram's illness did not interfere at all with her son's courtship ; people in that position of life were certainly curious.

A new vexation had come upon him, the work of his pet aversions, the Gainsboroughs. He had seen Mr Gainsborough once, and retained a picture of a small ineffectual man with a ragged tawny-brown beard and a big soft felt hat, who had an air of being very timid, rather pressed for money, and endowed with a kind heart. Now, it seemed, Mr Gainsborough was again overflowing with family affection (a disposition not always welcomed by its objects), and wanted to shake poor Lady Tristram's hand, and wanted poor Lady Tristram to kiss his daughter—wanted, in fact, a thorough-going burying of hatchets and a touching reconciliation. With that justice of judgment of which neither youth nor prejudice quite deprived him, Harry liked the letter ; but he was certain that the writer would be immensely tiresome. And again—in the end as in the beginning—he did not want the Gainsboroughs at Blent ; above all not just at the time when Blent was about to pass into his hands. It looked, however, as though it would be

extremely difficult to keep them away. Mr Gainsborough was obviously a man who would not waste his chance of a funeral; he might be fenced with till then, but it would need startling measures to keep him from a funeral.

"I hate hearsey people," grumbled Harry, as he threw the letter down. But the Gainsboroughs were soon to be driven out of his head by something more immediate and threatening.

Blent Pool is a round basin, some fifty or sixty feet in diameter; the banks are steep and the depth great: on the Blent Hall side there is no approach to it, except through a thick wood overhanging the water; on the other side the road up the valley runs close by, leaving a few yards of turf between itself and the brink. The scene is gloomy except in sunshine, and the place little frequented. It was a favourite haunt of Harry Tristram's, and he lay on the grass one evening, smoking and looking down on the black water; for the clouds were heavy above and rain threatened. His own mood was in harmony, gloomy and dark, in rebellion against the burden he carried, yet with no thought of laying it down. He did not notice a man who came up the road and took his stand just behind him, waiting there for a moment in silence and apparent irresolution.

"Mr Tristram."

Harry turned his head and saw Major Duplay; the Major was grave, almost solemn, as he raised his hat a trifle in formal salute.

"Do I interrupt you?"

"You couldn't have found a man more at leisure." Harry did not rise, but gathered his knees up, clasping his hands round them and looking up in Duplay's face. "You want to speak to me?"

"Yes, on a difficult matter." A visible embarrassment hung about the Major; he seemed to have little liking for his task. "I'm aware," he went on, "that I may lay myself open to some misunderstanding in what I'm about to say. I shall beg you to remember that I am in a difficult position, and that I am a gentleman and a soldier."

Harry said nothing; he waited with unmoved face and no sign of perturbation.

"It's best to be plain," Duplay proceeded. "It's best to be

open with you. I have taken the liberty of following you here for that purpose." He came a step nearer, and stood over Harry. "Certain facts have come to my knowledge which concern you very intimately."

A polite curiosity and a slight scepticism were expressed in Harry's "Indeed!"

"And not you only, or—I need hardly say—I shouldn't feel it necessary to occupy myself with the matter. A word about my own position you will perhaps forgive."

Harry frowned a little; certainly Duplay was inclined to prolixity; he seemed to be rolling the situation round his tongue and making the most of its flavour.

"Since we came here we have made many acquaintances, your own among the number; we are in a sense your guests."

"Not in a sense that puts you under any obligation," observed Harry.

"I'm sincerely glad to hear you say that; it relieves my position to some extent. But we have made friends too. In one house I myself (I may leave my niece out of the question) have been received with a hearty, cordial, warm friendship that seems already an old friendship. Now that does put one under an obligation, Mr Tristram."

"You refer to our friends the Ivers? Yes?"

"In my view, under a heavy obligation. I am, I say, in my judgment bound to serve them in all ways in my power, and to deal with them as I should wish and expect them to deal with me in a similar case."

Harry nodded a careless assent, and turned his eyes away toward the Pool; even already he seemed to know what was coming, or something of it.

"Facts have come to my knowledge of which it might be—indeed I must say of which it is—of vital importance that Mr Iver should be informed."

"I thought the facts concerned me?" asked Harry, with brows a little raised.

"Yes, and as matters now stand they concern him too for that very reason." Duplay had gathered confidence; his tone was calm and assured as he came step by step near his mark, as he established position after position in his attack.

" You are paying attentions to Miss Iver—with a view to marriage, I presume ? "

Harry made no sign. Duplay proceeded, slowly and with careful deliberation.

" Those attentions are offered and received as from Mr Tristram—as from the future Lord Tristram of Blent. I can't believe that you're ignorant of what I'm about to say. If you are, I must beg forgiveness for the pain I shall inflict on you. You, sir, are not the future Lord Tristram of Blent."

A silence followed : a slight drizzle had begun to fall, speckling the waters of the Pool ; neither man heeded it.

" It would be impertinent in me," the Major resumed, " to offer you any sympathy on the score of that misfortune ; believe me, however, that my knowledge—my full knowledge—of the circumstances can incline me to nothing but a deep regret. But facts are facts, however hardly they may bear on individuals." He paused. " I have asserted what I know. You are entitled to ask me for proofs, Mr Tristram."

Harry was silent a moment, thinking very hard. Many modes of defence came into his busy brain and were rejected. Should he be tempestuous ? No. Should he be amazed ? Again no. Even on his own theory of the story, Duplay's assertion hardly entitled him to be amazed.

" As regards my part in this matter," he said at last, " I have only this to say. The circumstances of my birth—with which I am, as you rightly suppose, quite familiar—were such as to render the sort of notion you have got hold of plausible enough. I don't want what you call proofs—though you'll want them badly if you mean to pursue your present line. I have my own proofs—perfectly in order, perfectly satisfactory. That's all I have to say about my part of the matter. About your part in it I can, I think, be almost equally brief. Are you merely Mr Iver's friend, or are you also, as you put it, paying attentions to Miss Iver ? "

" That, sir, has nothing to do with it."

Harry Tristram looked up at him. For the first time he broke into a smile as he studied Duplay's face. " I shouldn't in the least wonder," he said almost chaffingly, " if you believed that to be true. You get hold of a cock-and-bull story about my being illegitimate (Oh, I've no objection to plainness either

in its proper place !), you come to me and tell me almost in so many words that if I don't give up the lady you'll go to her father and show him your precious proofs. Everybody knows that you're after Miss Iver yourself, and yet you say that it has nothing to do with it ! That's the sort of thing a man may manage to believe about himself ; it's not the sort of thing that other people believe about him, Major Duplay." He rose slowly to his feet and the men stood face to face on the edge of the Pool. The rain fell more heavily : Duplay turned up his collar, Harry took no notice of the downpour.

" I'm perfectly satisfied as to the honesty of my own motives," said Duplay.

" That's not true, and you know it. You may try to shut your eyes, but you can't succeed."

Duplay was shaken. His enemy put into words what his own conscience had said to him. His position was hard : he was doing what honestly seemed to him the right thing to do : he could not seem to do it because it was right. He would be wronging the Ivers if he did not do it, yet how ugly it could be made to look ! He was not above suspicion even to himself, though he clung eagerly to his plea of honesty.

" You fail to put yourself in my place——" he began.

" Absolutely, I assure you," Harry interrupted, with quiet insolence.

" And I can't put myself in yours, sir. But I can tell you what I mean to do. It is my most earnest wish to take no steps in this matter at all ; but that rests with you, not with me. At least I desire to take none during Lady Tristram's illness, or during her life should she unhappily not recover."

" My mother will not recover," said Harry. " It's a matter of a few weeks at most."

Duplay nodded. " At least wait till then," he urged. " Do nothing more in regard to the matter we have spoken of while your mother lives." He spoke with genuine feeling. Harry Tristram marked it and took account of it. It was a point in the game to him.

" In turn I'll tell you what I mean to do," he said. " I mean to proceed exactly as if you had never come to Merrion Lodge, had never got your proofs from God knows where, and had never given me the pleasure of this very peculiar interview.

My mother would ask no consideration from you, and I ask none for her any more than for myself. To be plain for the last time, sir, you're making a fool of yourself at the best, and at the worst a blackguard into the bargain." He paused and broke into a laugh. "Well, then, where are the proofs? Show them me. Or send them down to Blent. Or I'll come up to Merrion. We'll have a look at them—for your sake, not for mine."

"I may have spoken inexactly, Mr Tristram. I know the facts; I could get, but have not yet got, the proof of them."

"Then don't waste your money, Major Duplay." He waited an instant before he gave a deeper thrust. "Or Iver's—because I don't think your purse is long enough to furnish the resources of war. You'd get the money from him? I'm beginning to wonder more and more at the views people contrive to take of their own actions."

Harry had fought his fight well, but now perhaps he went wrong, even as he had gone wrong with Mina Zabriska at Fairholme. He was not content to defeat or repel; he must triumph, he must taunt. The insolence of his speech and air drove Duplay to fury. If it told him he was beaten now, it made him determined not to give up the contest; it made him wish too that he was in a country where duelling was not considered absurd. At any rate he was minded to rebuke Harry.

"You're a young man——" he began.

"Tell me that when I'm beaten. It may console me," interrupted Harry.

"You'll be beaten, sir, sooner than you think," said Duplay gravely. "But though you refuse my offer, I shall consider Lady Tristram. I will not move while she lives, unless you force me to it."

"By marrying the heiress you want?" sneered Harry.

"By carrying out your swindling plans." Duplay's temper began to fail him. "Listen. As soon as your engagement is announced—if it ever is—I go to Mr Iver with what I know. If you abandon the idea of that marriage, you're safe from me. I have no other friends here; the rest must look after themselves. But you shall not delude my friends with false pretences."

"And I shall not spoil your game with Miss Iver?"

Duplay's temper quite failed him. He had not meant this to happen ; he had pictured himself calm, Harry wild and unrestrained—either in fury or in supplication. The young man had himself in hand, firmly in hand ; the elder lost self-control.

" If you insult me again, sir, I'll throw you in the river ! "

Harry's slow smile broke across his face. With all his wariness and calculation he measured the Major's figure. The attitude of mind was not heroic ; it was Harry's. Who, having ten thousand men, will go against him that has twenty thousand ? A fool or a hero, Harry would have said, and he claimed neither name. But in the end he reckoned that he was a match for the Major. He smiled more broadly and raised his brows, asking of sky and earth as he glanced round :

" Since when have blackmailers grown so sensitive ? "

In an instant Duplay closed with him in a struggle on which hung not death indeed, but an unpleasant and humiliating ducking. The rain fell on both ; the water waited for one. The Major was taller and heavier ; Harry was younger and in better trim. Harry was cooler too. It was rude hugging, nothing more ; neither of them had skill or knew more tricks than the common dimly-remembered devices of urchinhood. The fight was most unpicturesque, most unheroic ; but it was tolerably grim for all that. The grass grew slippery under the rain and the slithering feet ; luck had its share. And just behind them ran the Queen's highway. They did not think of the Queen's highway. To this pass a determination to be calm, whatever else they were, had brought them.

The varying wriggles (no more dignified word is appropriate) of the encounter ended in a stern stiff grip which locked the men one to the other, Duplay facing down the valley, Harry looking up the river. Harry could not see over the Major's shoulder, but he saw past it, and sighted a tall dogcart driven quickly and rather rashly down the hill. It was raining hard now, and had not looked like rain when the dogcart started. Hats were being ruined—there was some excuse for risking broken knees to the horse and broken necks to the riders. In the middle of his struggle Harry smiled : he put out his strength too ; and he did not warn his enemy of what he saw ; yet he knew very well who was in the dogcart. Duplay's anger had stirred him to seek a primitive though effective

revenge. Harry was hoping to inflict a more subtle punishment. He needed only a bit of luck to help him to it; he knew how to use the chance when it came—just as well as he knew who was in the dogcart, as well as he guessed whence the dogcart came.

The luck did not fail. Duplay's right foot slipped. In the effort to recover himself he darted out his left over the edge of the bank. Harry impelled him; the Major loosed his hold and set to work to save himself—none too soon: both his legs were over, his feet touched water, he lay spread-eagled on the bank, half on, half off, in a ludicrous attitude; still he slipped and could not get a hold on the short slimy grass. At that moment the dogcart was pulled up just behind them.

"What are you doing?" cried Janie Iver, leaning forward in amazement; Mina Zabriska sat beside her with wide-open eyes. Harry stooped, caught the Major under the shoulders, and with a great effort hauled him up on the bank, a sad sight, draggled and dirty. Then, as Duplay slowly rose, he turned with a start, as though he noticed the newcomers for the first time. He laughed as he raised his cap.

"We didn't know we were to have spectators," said he. "And you nearly came in for a tragedy! He was all but gone. Weren't you, Major?"

"What were you doing?" cried Janie again. Mina was silent and still, scrutinizing both men keenly.

"Why, we had been talking about wrestling, and the Major offered to show me a trick which he bet a shilling would floor me. Only the ground was too slippery; wasn't it, Major? And the trick didn't exactly come off. I wasn't floored, so I must trouble you for a shilling, Major."

Major Duplay did not look at Janie, still less did he meet his niece's eye. He spent a few seconds in a futile effort to rub the mud off his coat with muddy hands; he glanced a moment at Harry.

"I must have another try some day," he said, but with no great readiness.

"Meanwhile—the shilling!" demanded Harry good-humouredly, a subtle mockery in his eyes alone showing the imaginary character of the bet which he claimed to have won.

In the presence of those two inquisitive young women Major

Duplay did not deny the debt. He felt in his pocket, found a shilling, and gave it to Harry Tristram. That young man looked at it, spun it in the air, and pocketed it.

" Yes, a revenge whenever you like," said he. " And now we'd better get home, because it's begun to rain."

" Begun to ! It's rained for half an hour," said Janie crossly.

" Has it ? I didn't notice. I was too busy with the Major's trick."

As he spoke he looked full in Mina Zabriska's face. She bore his glance for a moment, then cried to Janie, " Oh, please drive on ! " The dogcart started ; the Major, with a stiff touch of his hat, strode along the road. Harry was left alone by the Pool. His gaiety and defiance vanished ; he stood there scowling at the Pool. On the surface the honours of the encounter were indeed his ; the real peril remained, the real battle had still to be fought. It was with heart-felt sincerity that he muttered, as he sought for pipe and tobacco :

" I wish I'd drowned the beggar in the Pool ! "

CHAPTER VI

The Attraction of It

MR JENKINSON NEELD sat at lunch at the Imperium Club, quite happy with a neck chop, last week's *Athenæum*, and a pint of Apollinaris. To him enter disturbers of peace.

"How are you, Neeld?" said Lord Southend, taking the chair next to him. "Sit down here, Iver. Let me introduce you—Mr Iver—Mr Neeld. Bill of fare, waiter." His lordship smiled rather maliciously at Mr Neeld as he made the introduction, which Iver acknowledged with bluff courtesy, Neeld with a timid little bow. "How are things down your way?" pursued Southend, addressing Iver. "Lady Tristram's very ill, I hear?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Wonderful woman that, you know. You ought to have seen her in the seventies—when she ran away with Randolph Edge."

A gentleman, two tables off, looked round.

"Hush, Southend! That's his brother," whispered Mr Neeld.

"Whose brother?" demanded Southend.

"That's Wilmot Edge—Sir Randolph's brother."

"Oh, the deuce it is. I thought he'd been pilled."

Blackballs also were an embarrassing subject; Neeld sipped his Apollinaris nervously.

"Well, as I was saying" (Lord Southend spoke a little lower), "she went straight from the Duchess of Slough's ball to the station, as she was, in a low gown and a scarlet opera cloak—met Edge, whose wife had only been dead three months—and went off with him. You know the rest of the story. It was a near run for young Harry Tristram! How is the boy, Iver?"

"The boy's very much of a man indeed; we don't talk about the near run before him."

Southend laughed. "A miss is as good as a mile," he said,

" eh, Neeld ? I'd like to see Addie Tristram again—though I suppose she's a wreck, poor thing ! "

" Why couldn't she marry the man properly, instead of bolting ? " asked Iver. He did not approve of such escapades.

" Oh, he had to bolt anyhow—a thorough bad lot—debts, you know—her people wouldn't hear of it ; besides she was engaged to Fred Nares—you don't remember Fred ? A devilish passionate fellow, with a wart on his nose. So altogether it was easier to cut and run. Besides she liked the sort of thing, don't you know. Romantic and all that. Then Edge vanished, and the other man appeared. That turned out all right, but she ran it fine. Eh, Neeld ? "

Mr Neeld was sadly flustered by these recurring references to him. He had no desire to pose as an authority on the subject. Josiah Cholderton's diary put him in a difficulty. He wished to goodness he had been left to the peaceful delights of literary journalism.

" Well, if you'll come down to my place, I can promise to show you Harry Tristram ; and you can go over and see his mother if she's better."

" By Jove, I've half a mind to ! Very kind of you, Iver. You've got a fine place, I hear."

" I've built so many houses for other people that I may be allowed one for myself, mayn't I ? We're proud of our neighbourhood," he pursued, politely addressing himself to Mr Neeld. " If you're ever that way, I hope you'll look me up. I shall be delighted to welcome a fellow-member of the Imperium."

A short chuckle escaped from Lord Southend's lips ; he covered it by an exaggerated devotion to his broiled kidneys. Mr Neeld turned pink and murmured incoherent thanks ; he felt like a traitor.

" Yes, we see a good deal of young Harry," said Iver, with a smile—" and of other young fellows about the place too. They don't come to see me, though. I expect Janie's the attraction. You remember my girl, Southend ? "

" Well, I suppose Blent's worth nine or ten thousand a year still ? " The progress of Lord Southend's thoughts was obvious.

" H'm. Seven or eight, I should think, as it's managed

now. It's a nice place, though, and would go a good bit better in proper hands."

" Paterfamilias considering ? "

" I don't quite make the young fellow out. He's got a good opinion of himself, I fancy." Iver laughed a little. " Well, we shall see," he ended.

" Not a bad thing to be Lady Tristram of Blent, you know, Iver. That's none of your pinchbeck. The real thing—though, as I say, young Harry's only got it by the skin of his teeth. Eh, Neeld ? "

Mr Neeld laid down his napkin and pushed back his chair.

" Sit still, man. We've nearly finished, and we'll all have a cup of coffee together and a cigar."

Misfortunes accumulated, for Neeld hated tobacco. But he was anxious to be scrupulously polite to Iver, and thus to deaden the pangs of conscience. Resigned though miserable, he went with them to the smoking-room. Colonel Wilmot Edge looked up from the *Army and Navy Gazette*, and glanced curiously at the party as they passed his table. Why were these old fellows reviving old stories ? They were better left at rest. The Colonel groaned as he went back to his newspaper.

Happily, in the smoking-room the talk shifted to less embarrassing subjects. Iver told of his life and doings, and Neeld found himself drawn to the man : he listened with interest and appreciation ; he seemed brought into touch with life ; he caught himself sighing over the retired inactive nature of his own occupations. He forgave Iver the hoardings about the streets ; he could not forgive himself the revenge he had taken for them. Iver and Southend spoke of big schemes in which they had been or were engaged together—legitimate enterprises, good for the nation as well as for themselves. How had he, a useless old fogey, dared to blackball a man like Iver ? An occasional droll glance from Southend emphasized his compunction.

" I see you've got a new thing coming out, Neeld," said Southend, after a pause in the talk. " I remember old Cholderton very well. He was a starchy old chap, but he knew his subjects. Makes rather heavy reading, I should think, eh ? "

" Not all of it, not by any means all of it," Neeld assured him. " He doesn't confine himself to business matters."

" Still, even old Joe Cholderton's recreations——"

" He was certainly mainly an observer, but he saw some interesting things and people." There was a renewed touch of nervousness in Mr Neeld's manner.

" Interesting people ? H'm. Then I hope he's discreet ? "

" Or that Mr Neeld will be discreet for him," Iver put in. " Though I don't know why interesting people are supposed to create a need for discretion."

" Oh yes, you do, Iver. You know the world. Don't you be too discreet, Neeld. Give us a taste of Joe's lighter style."

Neeld did not quite approve of his deceased and respected friend being referred to as ' Joe,' nor did he desire to discuss in that company what he had and what he had not suppressed in the Journal.

" I have used the best of my judgment," he said primly, and was surprised to find Iver smiling at him with an amused approval.

" The least likely men break out," Lord Southend continued hopefully. " The Baptist minister down at my place once waylaid the wife of the Chairman of Quarter Sessions and asked her to run away with him."

" That's one of your Nonconformist stories, Southend. I never believe them," said Iver.

" Oh, I'm not saying anything. She was a pretty woman. I just gave it as an illustration. I happen to know it's true, because she told me herself."

" Ah, I'd begin to listen if he'd told you," was Iver's cautious comment.

" You give us the whole of old Joe Cholderton ! " was Lord Southend's final injunction.

" Imagine if I did ! " thought Neeld, beginning to feel some of the joy of holding a secret.

Presently Southend took his leave, saying he had an engagement. To his own surprise Neeld did not feel this to be an unwarrantable proceeding ; he sat on with Iver, and found himself cunningly encouraging his companion to talk again about the Tristrams. The story in the Journal had not lost its interest for him ; he had read it over more than once again ; it was strange to be brought into contact, even at second-hand, with the people whose lives and fortunes it concerned. It was

evident that Iver, on his side, had for some reason been thinking of the Tristrams too, and he responded readily to Neeld's veiled invitation. He described Blent for him ; he told him how Lady Tristram had looked, and that her illness was supposed to be fatal ; he talked again of Harry Tristram, her destined successor. But he said no more of his daughter. Neeld was left without any clear idea that his companion's concern with the Tristrams was more than that of a neighbour or beyond what an ancient family with odd episodes in its history might naturally inspire.

" Oh, you must come to Blentmouth, Mr Neeld, you must indeed. For a few days, now ? Choose your time, only let it be soon. Why, if you made your way into the library at Blent, you might happen on a find there ! A lot of interesting stuff there, I'm told. And we shall be very grateful for a visit."

Neeld was conscious of a strong desire to go to Blentmouth. But it would be a wrong thing to do ; he felt that he could not fairly accept Iver's hospitality. And he felt, moreover, that he had much better not get himself mixed up with the Tristrams of Blent. No man is bound to act on hearsay evidence, especially when that evidence has been acquired through a confidential channel. But if he came to know the Tristrams, to know Harry Tristram, his position would certainly be peculiar. Well, that was in the end why he wanted to do it.

Iver rose and held out his hand. " I must go," he said. " Fairholme, Blentmouth ! I hope I shall have a letter from you soon, to tell us to look out for you."

One of the unexpected likings that occur between people had happened. Each man felt it and recognized it in the other. They were alone in the room for the moment.

" Mr Iver," said Neeld, in his precise prim tones, " I must make a confession to you. When you were up for this club I —my vote was not in your favour."

During a minute's silence Iver looked at him with amusement and almost with affection.

" I'm glad you've told me that."

" Well, I'm glad I have too." Neeld's laugh was nervous.

" Because it shows that you're thinking of coming to Blentmouth."

" Well—yes, I am," answered Neeld, smiling. And they

shook hands. Here was the beginning of a friendship ; here, also, Neeld's entry on the scene where Harry Tristram's fortunes formed the subject of the play.

It was now a foregone conclusion that Mr Neeld would fall before temptation and come to Blentmouth. There had been little doubt about it all along ; his confession to Iver removed the last real obstacle. The story in Josiah Cholderton's Journal had him in its grip ; on the first occasion of trial his resolution not to be mixed up with the Tristrams melted away. Perhaps he consoled himself by saying that he would be, like his deceased and respected friend, mainly an observer. The Imp, it may be remembered, had gone to Merrion Lodge with exactly the same idea ; it has been seen how it fared with her.

By the Blent the drama seemed very considerately to be waiting for him. It says much for Major Duplay that his utter and humiliating defeat by the Pool had not driven him into any hasty action or shaken him in his original purpose. He was abiding by the offer which he had made, although the offer had been scornfully rejected. If he could by any means avoid it, he was determined not to move while Lady Tristram lived. Harry might force him to act sooner ; that rested with Harry, not with him. Meanwhile he declined to explain even to Mina what had occurred by the Pool, and treated her open incredulity as to Harry's explanation with silence or a snub. The Major was not happy at this time ; yet his unhappiness was nothing to the deep woe, and indeed terror, which had settled on Mina Zabriska. She had guessed enough to see that, for the moment at least, Harry had succeeded in handling Duplay so roughly as to delay, if not to thwart, his operations ; what would he not do to her, whom he must know to be the original cause of the trouble ? She used to stand on the terrace at Merrion and wonder about this ; and she dared not go to Fairholme lest she should encounter Harry. She made many good resolutions for the future, but there was no comfort in the present days.

The resolutions went for nothing, even in the moment in which they were made. She had suffered for meddling ; that was bad : it was worse to the Imp not to meddle ; inactivity was the one thing unendurable.

She too, like old Mr Neeld in London town, was drawn by

the interest of the position, by the need of seeing how Harry Tristram fought his fight. For four days she resisted ; on the evening of the fifth, after dinner, while the Major dozed, she came out on the terrace in a cloak and looked down the hill. It was rather dark, and Blent Hall loomed dimly in the valley below. She pulled the hood of her cloak over her head, and began to descend the hill : she had no special purpose ; she wanted a nearer look at Blent, and it was a fine night for a stroll. She came to the road, crossed it after a momentary hesitation, and stood by the gate of the little foot-bridge, which, in the days before enmity arose, Harry Tristram had told her was never locked. It was not now. Mina advanced to the middle of the bridge and leant on the parapet, her eyes set on Blent Hall. There were lights in the lower windows ; one window on the upper floor was lighted too. There, doubtless, Lady Tristram lay slowly dying ; somewhere else in the house Harry was keeping his guard and perfecting his defences. The absolute peace and rest of the outward view, the sleepless vigilance and unceasing battle within, a battle that death made keener and could not lull to rest—this contrast came upon Mina with a strange painfulness ; her eyes filled with tears as she stood looking.

A man came out into the garden and lit a cigar ; she knew it was Harry ; she did not move. He sauntered toward the bridge ; she held her ground ; though he should strike her, she would have speech with him to-night. He was by the bridge and had his hand on the gate at the Blent end of it before he saw her. He stood still a moment, then came to her side, and leant as she was leaning over the parapet. He was bare-headed—she saw his thick hair and his peaked forehead ; he smoked steadily ; he showed no surprise at seeing her, and he did not speak to her for a long time. At last, still without looking at her, he began. She could just make out his smile, or thought she could ; at any rate she was sure it was there.

" Well, Mina de Kries ? " said he. She started a little. " Oh, I don't believe in the late Zabriska ; I don't believe you're grown up ; I think you're about fifteen—a beastly age." He put his cigar back in his mouth.

" You see that window ? " he resumed in a moment. " And you know what's happening behind it ? My mother's dying

there. Well, how's the Major? Has he got that trick in better order yet?"

She found her tongue with difficulty.

"Does Lady Tristram know about—about me?" she stammered.

"I sometimes lie to my mother," said Harry, flicking his ash into the river. "Why do you lie to your uncle, though?"

"I didn't lie. You know I didn't lie."

He shrugged his shoulders wearily and relapsed into silence. Silence there was till, a minute or two later, it was broken by a little sob from Mina Zabriska. He turned his head toward her; then he took hold of her arm and twisted her face round to him. The tears were running down her cheeks.

"I'm so, so sorry," she murmured. "I didn't mean to; and I did it! And now—now I can't stop it. You needn't believe me if you don't like, but I'm—I'm miserable and—and frightened."

He flung his cigar into the water and put his hands in his pockets. So he stood watching her, his body swaying a little to and fro; his eyes were suspicious of her, yet they seemed amused also, and they were not cruel; it was not such a look as he had given her when they parted by the Pool.

"If it were true?" she asked. "I mean, couldn't Lady Tristram somehow——?"

"If what was true? Oh, the nonsense you told Duplay?" He laughed. "If it was true, I should be a nobody and nobody's son. I suppose that would amuse you very much, wouldn't it? You wouldn't have come to Merrion for nothing then! But as it isn't true, what's the use of talking?"

He won no belief from her when he said that it was not true; to her quick mind the concentrated bitterness with which he described what it would mean to him showed that he believed it and that the thought was no new one; in imagination he had heard the world calling him many times what he now called himself—if the thing were true. She drew her cloak round her and shivered.

"Cold?" he asked.

"No. Wretched, wretched."

"Would you like to see my mother?"

"You wouldn't let her see me?"

" She's asleep, and the nurse is at supper—not that she'd matter. Come along."

He turned and began to walk quickly toward the house ; Mina followed him as though in a dream. They entered a large hall. It was dark, save for one candle, and she could see nothing of its furniture. He led her straight up a broad oak staircase that rose from the middle of it, and then along a corridor. The polished oak gleamed here and there as they passed candles in brackets on the wall, and was slippery under her unaccustomed feet. The whole house was very still—still, cool, and very peaceful.

Cautiously he opened a door and beckoned her to follow him. Lights were burning in the room. Lady Tristram lay sleeping ; her hair, still fair and golden, spread over the pillow ; her face was calm and unlined. She seemed a young and beautiful girl wasted by a fever ; but the fever was the fever of life as well as of disease. Thus Mina saw again the lady she had seen at Heidelberg.

" She won't wake—she's had her sleeping draught," he said ; and Mina took him to mean that she might linger a moment more. She cast her eyes round the room. Over the fireplace, facing the bed, was a full-length portrait of a girl. She was dressed all in red ; the glory of her white neck, her brilliant hair, and her blue eyes rose out of the scarlet setting. This was Addie Tristram in her prime ; as she was when she fled with Randolph Edge, as she was when she cried in the little room at Heidelberg, " Think of the difference it makes, the enormous difference ! "

" My mother likes to have that picture there," Harry explained.

The sleeping woman stirred faintly. In obedience to a look from Harry, Mina followed him from the room, and they passed downstairs and through the hall together in silence. He came with her as far as the bridge. There he paused. The scene they had left had apparently stirred no new emotion in him ; but Mina Zabriska was trembling and moved to the heart.

" Now you've seen her—and before that you'd seen me. And perhaps now you'll understand that we're the Tristrams of Blent, and that we live and die that." His voice grew a little louder. " And your nonsense ! " he exclaimed ; " it's all a

lie. But if it was true ? It's the blood, isn't it, not the law, that matters ? It's her blood and my blood. That's my real title to Blent ! "

In the midst of his lying he spoke truth there, and Mina knew it. It seemed as though there, to her, in the privacy of that night, he lied as but a matter of form ; his true heart, his true purpose, and his true creed he showed her in his last words. By right of blood he claimed to stand master of Blent, and so he meant to stand.

" Yes," she said. " Yes, yes. God help you to it." She turned and left him, and ran up the hill, catching her breath in sobs again.

Harry Tristram stood and watched her as long as he could see her retreating figure. There were no signs of excitement about him ; even his confession of faith he had spoken calmly, although with strong emphasis. He smiled now as he turned on his heel and took his way back to the house.

" The Major must play his hand alone now," he said ; " he'll get no more help from her." He paused a moment. " It's a funny thing, though. That's not really why I took her up."

He shook his head in puzzle ; perhaps he could hardly be expected to recognize that it was that pride of his—pride in his mother, his race, himself—which had made him bid Mina Zabriska look upon Lady Tristram as she slept.

CHAPTER VII

The Moment draws Near

NOT knowing your own mind, though generally referred to as an intellectual weakness and sometimes as a moral fault, is none the less now and then a pleasant state to live in for a while. There is a richness of possibility about it, a variety of prospects open, a choice of roads each in its own fashion attractive. Besides, you can always tell yourself that it is prudent to look all round the question and consider all alternatives. The pleasure, like most pleasures, is greater when it comes once in a way to a person unaccustomed to it. Janie Iver had been brought up to know her own mind ; it was the eleventh commandment in the Iver household. Iver entertained the intellectual, his wife the moral objection to shilly-shallying ; their daughter's training, while conducted with all kindness, had been eminently sensible, and early days had offered few temptations to stray from the path of the obviously desirable. The case was different now ; riches brought a change, the world revealed its resources, life was spreading out its diverse wares. Janie was much puzzled as to what she ought to do, more as to what she wanted to do, most of all as to what she would in the end do—unless indeed the fact that she was puzzled continued to rank as the greatest puzzle of all.

Naturally the puzzles were personified—or the persons made into puzzles. Men became lives to her, as well as individuals —the Tristram, the Duplay, the Broadley life ; her opinion of the life complicated her feeling toward the person. The Tristram life attracted her strongly, the life of the great lady ; Harry had his fascination too ; but she did not think that she and Harry would be very happy together, woman and man. She was loth to let him go, with all that he meant ; perhaps she would have been secretly relieved if fate had taken him away from her. The Duplay life promised another sort of joy : the Major's experience was world-wide, his knowledge various, his conversation full of hints of the unexplored ; she would be

broadening her life if she identified it with his. Yet the Major was an approximate forty (on one side or the other), in a few years would seem rather old, and was not even now capable of raising a very strong sentiment ; there too she would be taking rather the life than the man. Lastly, there was that quiet Broadley life, to be transformed in some degree, doubtless, by her wealth, but likely to remain in essentials the peaceful homely existence which she knew very well. It had little to set against the rival prospects ; yet there was a feeling that in either of the other two existences she would miss something ; and that something seemed to be Bob Broadley himself.

She found herself thinking, in terms superficially repugnant to convention, that she would like to pay long visits to the other men, but have Bob to come home to when she was inclined for rest and tranquillity. Her perplexity was not strange in itself, but it was strange and new to her ; imbued with the parental views about shilly-shallying, she was angry with herself and inclined to be ashamed. The excuse she had made to Mina Zabriska did not acquit her in her own eyes. Yet she was also interested, excited, and pleasantly awake to the importance which her indecision gave her.

Judged from the outside, she was not open to blame in her attitude toward Harry ; he was not in love with her, and hardly pretended to be. She met him fairly on a friendly footing of business ; he was the sinner in that, while what she offered was undoubtedly hers, what he proposed to give in return was only precariously his.

Nor had Duplay any cause of complaint in being kept waiting ; he would be held exceedingly lucky not to be sent to the right-about instantly. But with Bob Broadley the matter was different. On the subtle question of what exactly constitutes ' encouragement ' (it is the technical term) in these cases it is not perhaps necessary to enter ; but false hopes might, no doubt, arise from her visits to Mingham, from her habit of riding up the road by the river about the time when Bob would be likely to be riding down it, or of sauntering by the Pool on the days when he drove his gig into Blentmouth on business—all this being beyond and outside legitimate meetings at Fairholme itself. Unless she meant to marry him she might indeed raise hopes that were false.

Yes, but it did not seem as though she did. Bob was humble. She had tyrannized over him even before the Ivers grew so very rich. (They had begun in a small villa at Blentmouth—Miss Swinkerton lived there now.) It was natural that she should tyrannize still. He saw that she liked to meet him ; grateful for friendship, he was incredulous of more. His disposition may plead in excuse for her ; whatever she did, she would not disappoint a confident hope.

But she was always so glad to see him, and when she was with him, he was no perplexity, he was only her dear old friend. Well, and one thing besides—a man whom it was rather amusing to try to get a compliment out of, to try to torment into a manifestation of devotion ; it was all there ; Janie liked to lure it to the surface sometimes. But Bob was not even visibly miserable ; he was always equable, even jolly, with so much to say about his horses and his farm that sentiment did not always secure its fair share of the interview. Janie, not being sentimental either, liked all this even while it affronted her vanity.

" Send the gig home and stay and talk," she commanded, as he stopped by her on the road ; he was returning from Blentmouth to Mingham and found her strolling by the Pool. " I want to speak to you."

He had his bailiff with him—they had been selling a cow—and left him to take the gig home. He shook hands with frank cordiality.

" That's awfully nice of you," he said. " What about ? "

" Nothing in particular," said she. " Mayn't I want it just generally ? "

" Oh, well, I thought you meant there was something special. I've sold the cow well, Miss Janie."

" Bother the cow ! Why haven't you been to Fairholme ? "

" Well, in fact, I'm not sure that Mr Iver is death on seeing me there too often. But I shall turn up all right soon."

" Have you been going about anywhere ? "

" No. Been up at Mingham most of the time."

" Isn't that rather lonely ? "

" Lonely ? Good Heavens, no ! I've got too much to do."

Janie glanced at him ; what was to be done with a man who

treated provocative suggestions as though they were sincere questions ? If he had not cared for her now ! But she knew he did.

" Well, I've been very dull, anyhow. One never sees anybody fresh at Fairholme now. It's always either Mr Tristram or Major Duplay."

" Well, I shouldn't be very fresh either, should I ? " The names she mentioned drew no sign from him.

" I don't count you as a visitor at all—and they are visitors, I suppose." She seemed a little in doubt ; yet both the gentlemen, at any rate, were not presumably received as members of the family.

" I'll tell you what I've been thinking about," said Bob, speaking slowly, and apparently approaching a momentous announcement.

" Yes," she said, turning to him with interest, and watching his handsome open face ; it was not a very clever face, but it was a very pleasant one ; she enjoyed looking at it.

" I've been thinking that I'll sell the black horse, but I can't make up my mind whether to do it now or keep him through the summer and sell him when hunting begins. I don't know which would pay me best."

" That certainly is a very important question," remarked Janie, with a wealth of sarcasm.

" Well, it gives me a lot of trouble, Miss Janie."

" Does it ? And it doesn't interest me in the very—Yes, it does, Bob, very much. I'm sorry. Of course it does. Only——"

" Anything the matter with you ? " Bob inquired with friendly solicitude.

" No—not just now. There never is, somehow, when I'm with you. And let's talk about the black horse—it'll be soothing. Is the price of oats a factor ? "

Bob laughed a little, but did not proceed with the discussion. They sauntered on in silence for a few minutes, Bob taking out his tobacco.

" Worried, aren't you ? " he asked, lighting his pipe.

" Yes," she answered shortly.

" Was that what you wanted to say to me ? "

" No, of course not ; as if I should talk to you about it ! "

"Don't suppose you would, no. Still, we're friends, aren't we?"

"Do you feel friendly to me?"

"Friendly! Well——!" He laughed. "What do you think about it yourself?" he asked. "Look here, I don't bother you, but I'm here when you want me."

"When I want you?"

"I mean, if I can do anything for you, or—or advise you. I don't think I'm a fool, you know."

"I'm really glad to hear you've got as far as that," she remarked rather tartly. "Your fault, Bob, is not thinking nearly enough of yourself."

"You'll soon change that, if you say much more." His pleasure in her implied praise was obvious, but he did not read a single word more into her speech than the words she uttered.

"And you are friendly to me—still?"

"It doesn't make any difference to me whether I see you or not——"

"What?" she cried. The next moment she was laughing. "Thanks, Bob, but—but you've a funny way of putting things sometimes." She laid her hand on his arm for a moment, sighing, "Dear old Bob!"

"Oh, you know what I mean," he said, puffing away. His healthy skin had flushed a trifle, but that was his only reply to her little caress.

"If—if I came to you some day and said I'd been a fool, or been made a fool of, and was very unhappy, and—and wanted comforting, would you still be nice to me?"

His answer came after a puff and a pause.

"Well, if you ever get like that, I should recommend you just to try me for what I'm worth," he said. Her eyes were fixed on his face, but he did not look at her. Some men would have seen in her appeal an opportunity of trying to win from her more than she was giving. The case did not present itself in that light to Bob Broadley. He did not press his own advantage, he hardly believed in it; and he had, besides, a vague idea that he would spoil for her the feeling she had if he greeted it with too much enthusiasm. What she wanted was a friend—a solid, possibly rather stolid, friend; with that

commodity he was prepared to provide her. Any sign of agitation in her he answered and hoped to quiet by an increased calm in his own manner. The humblest of men have moments of pride ; it must be confessed that Bob thought he was behaving not only with proper feeling but also with considerable tact—a tact that was based on knowledge of women.

Interviews such as these—and they were not infrequent—formed a rather incongruous background, but also an undeniable relief, to the life Janie was leading at Fairholme. That seemed to have little concern with Bob Broadley and to be engrossed in the struggle between Harry and Duplay. Both men pressed on. Harry had not been scared away. Duplay would win without using his secret weapon, if he could. Each had his manner : Harry's constrained yet direct ; the Major's more florid, more expressed in glances, compliments, and attentions. Neither had yet risked the decisive word. Janie was playing for delay. The Major seemed inclined to grant it her ; he would make every step firm under him before he took another forward. But Harry grew impatient, was imperious in his calls on her time, and might face her with the demand for an answer any day. She could not explain how it was, but somehow his conduct seemed to be influenced by the progress of Lady Tristram's illness. She gathered this idea from words he let fall ; perhaps his mother wanted to see the affair settled before she died. Duplay often spoke of the illness too ; it could have no importance for him at least, she thought.

About Harry Tristram anyhow she was right. He was using to its full value his rival's chivalrous desire to make no movement during Lady Tristram's lifetime ; he reckoned on it and meant to profit by it. The Major had indeed conveyed to him that the chivalry had its limits ; even if that were so, Harry would be no worse off ; and there was the chance that Duplay would not speak. A look of brutality would be given to any action of his while Lady Tristram lay dying ; Harry hoped this aspect of his conduct would frighten him. At least it was worth risking. The doctors talked of two months more ; Harry Tristram meant to be engaged before one of them was out. Could he be married before the second ran its course ? Mrs Iver would have scoffed at the idea, and Janie shrunk from it. But a dying mother's appeal would count with almost

irresistible strength in such a case; and Harry was sure of being furnished with this aid.

He came to Fairholme a day or two after Janie had talked with Bob Broadley. She was on the lawn; with her Mina Zabriska and a small, neat, elderly man, who was introduced to him as Mr Jenkinson Neeld. Harry paid little attention to this insignificant person, and gave Mina no more than a careless shake of the hand and a good-humoured amused nod; he was not afraid of her any longer. She had done what harm she could. If she did anything more now it would be on his side. Else why had he shown her Lady Tristram? He claimed Janie and contrived to lead her to some chairs on the other side of the lawn.

"And that's Mr Harry Tristram?" said Neeld, looking at him intently through his spectacles.

"Yes," said the Imp briefly—she was at the moment rather bored by Mr Neeld.

"An interesting-looking young man."

"Yes, he's interesting." And she added a moment later, "You're having a good look at him, Mr Neeld."

"Dear me, was I staring? I hope not. But—well, we've all heard of his mother, you know."

"I'm afraid the next thing we hear about her will be the last." What she had seen at Blent Hall was in her mind and she spoke sadly. "Mr Tristram will succeed to his throne soon now."

Neeld looked at her as if he were about to speak, but he said nothing, and his eyes wandered back to Harry again.

"They're friends—Miss Iver and he?" he asked at last.

"Oh, it's no secret that he wants to marry her."

"And does she——?"

Mina laughed, not very naturally. "It's something to be Lady Tristram of Blent." She smiled to think how much more her words meant to herself than they could mean to her companion. She would have been amazed to find that Neeld was thinking that she would not speak so lightly if she knew what he did.

Harry wanted to marry Janie Iver! With a sudden revulsion of feeling Neeld wished himself far from Blentmouth. However it was his duty to talk to this sharp little foreign woman,

and he meant to try. A few polite questions brought him to the point of inquiring her nationality.

" Oh, we're Swiss, French Swiss. But I was born at Heidelberg. My mother lived there after my father died. My uncle —who lives with me—Major Duplay, is her brother ; he was in the Swiss Service."

" A pleasant society at Heidelberg, I dare say ? "

" Rather dull," said Mina. It seemed much the same at Blentmouth at the moment.

Iver strolled out from his study on to the lawn. He cast a glance toward his daughter and Harry, frowned slightly, and sat down on Mina's other side. He had a newspaper in his hand, and he held it up as he spoke to Neeld across Mina.

" Your book's promised for the fifteenth, I see, Neeld."

" Yes, it's to be out then."

Mina was delighted at being presented with a topic. Sometimes it is the most precious of gifts.

" Oh, Mr Neeld, have you written a book ? How interesting ! What is it ? A novel ? "

" My dear Madame Zabriska ! " murmured Neeld, feeling as if he were being made fun of. " And it's not really my book. I've only edited it."

" But that's just as good," Mina insisted amiably. " Do tell me what it is."

" Here you are, Mina. There's the full title and description for you. There's nothing else in the paper." Iver handed it to her with a stifled yawn. She read and turned to Neeld with a quick jerk of her head.

" Journal and Correspondence of Josiah Cholderton ! " she repeated. " Oh, but—oh, but—well, that is curious ! Why, we used to know Mr Cholderton ! "

" You knew Mr Cholderton ? " said Mr Neeld in mild surprise. Then, with a recollection, he added, " Oh, at Heidelberg, I dare say ? But you must have been a child ? "

" Yes, I was. Does he talk about Heidelberg ? "

" He mentions it once or twice." In spite of himself Neeld began to feel that he was within measurable distance of getting on to difficult ground.

" What fun if he mentioned me ! Oh, but of course he wouldn't say anything about a child of five ! "

The slightest start ran through Neeld's figure ; it passed unnoticed. He looked sharply at Mina Zabriska. She went on in all innocence this time ; she had no reason to think that Cholderton had been in possession of any secrets, and if he had it would not have occurred to her that he would record them.

" He knew my mother quite well ; he used to come and see us. Does he mention her—Madame de Kries ? "

There was a perceptible pause ; then Neeld answered primly

" I'm afraid you won't find your mother's name mentioned in Mr Cholderton's Journal, Madame Zabriska."

" How horrid ! " remarked Mina, greatly disappointed ; she regarded Mr Neeld with a new interest all the same.

They were both struck with this strange coincidence—as it seemed to them ; though in fact that they should meet at Blentmouth was not properly a coincidence at all. There was nothing surprising about it ; the same cause and similar impulses had brought them both there. The woman who lay dying at Blent and the young man who sat making love under the tree yonder—these and no more far-fetched causes—had brought them both where they were. Mina knew the truth about herself, Neeld about himself ; neither knew or guessed it about the other. Hence their wonder and their unreasonable feeling that there was something of a fate bringing them together in that place.

" You're sure he says nothing about us ? " she urged.

" You'll not find a word," he replied, sticking to the form of assertion that salved his conscience. He looked across the lawn again, but Janie and Harry had disappeared amongst the bushes.

" You're sort of old acquaintances at second-hand, then," said Iver, smiling. " Cholderton's the connecting link."

" He didn't like me," remarked Mina. " He used to call me the Imp."

" Yes, yes," said Neeld in absent-minded acquiescence. " Yes, the Imp."

" You don't seem much surprised ! " cried Mina in mock indignation.

" Surprised ? " He started more violently. " Oh, yes—I—I—Of course ! I'm——" A laugh from his host spared him the effort of further apologies. But he was a good deal

shaken ; he had nearly betrayed his knowledge of the Imp. Indeed he could not rid himself of the idea that there was a very inquisitive look in Madame Zabriska's large eyes.

Mina risked one more question, put very carelessly.

" I think he must have met Lady Tristram there once or twice. Does he say anything about her ? "

" Not a word," said Neeld, grasping the nettle firmly this time.

Mina took another look at him, but he blinked resolutely behind his glasses.

" Well, it's just like Mr Cholderton to leave out all the interesting things," she observed resignedly. " Only I wonder why you edit his book if it's like that, you know."

" Hullo, what's that ? " exclaimed Iver, suddenly sitting up in his chair.

They heard the sound of a horse's galloping on the road outside. The noise of the hoofs stopped suddenly. They sat listening. In a minute or two the butler led a groom in the Tristram livery on to the lawn. He came quickly across to Iver, touching his hat.

" Beg pardon, sir, but could I see Mr Tristram ? I've an important message for him."

At the same moment Janie and Harry Tristram came out on to the grass. Harry saw the groom and was with them in a moment, Janie following.

" Well, Sam, what is it ? You were riding hard."

" Her ladyship has had a relapse, sir, and Dr Fryer ordered me to ride over and tell you at once. No time to lose, he said, sir."

" Did you bring a horse for me ? "

" No, sir. But I'm riding Quilldriver."

" I'll go back on him. You can walk." He turned to the rest. " I must go at once," he said. " I don't know what this may mean."

" Not so bad as it sounds, I hope," said Iver. " But you'd best be off at once."

Harry included Mina and Mr Neeld in one light nod, and walked briskly toward the gate, Iver and Janie accompanying him. Mina and Neeld were left together, and sat in silence some moments.

" It sounds as if she was dying," said Mina at last in a low voice.

" Yes, poor woman ! "

" I saw her once lately. She was very beautiful, Mr Neeld."

" Yes yes, to her own great trouble, poor thing ! "

" You knew about——? "

" Oh, everybody knew, Madame Zabriska."

" Yes, and now she's dying ! " She turned to him, looking him fairly in the face. " And Harry'll be Tristram of Blent," she said.

" Yes," said Neeld. " He'll be Tristram of Blent."

Both fell into silence again, looking absently at the sunshine playing among the trees. They were not to share their secret just yet. A link was missing between them still.

Harry came to where the horse was, and stood there for a moment, while the groom altered the stirrups to suit him.

" It's the beginning of the end, if not the end itself," he said.

" Our earnest good wishes to her."

" My love," said Janie. Her father glanced quickly at her.

Harry jumped into the saddle, waved his hand to them, and started at a gallop for Blent. The groom, with another touch of his hat, trudged off in his master's track. Janie Iver stood looking as long as Harry was in sight.

" He won't spare the horse," said Iver.

" Well, he can't this time ; and anyhow he wouldn't, if he wanted to get there." She took her father's arm and pressed it. " Father, Harry Tristram has just asked me to marry him. He said Lady Tristram wanted it settled before—before she died, or he wouldn't have spoken so soon."

" Well, Janie dear ? "

" When the groom came, I had just told him that I would give him an answer in a week. But now ! " She made a gesture with her free hand ; it seemed to mean bewilderment. She could not tell what would happen now.

CHAPTER VIII

Duty and Mr Neeld

WHEN Mina Zabriska brought back the news from Fairholme, and announced it with an intensity of significance which the sudden aggravation of an illness long known to be mortal hardly accounted for, Major Duplay grew very solemn. The moment for action approached, and the nearer it came, the less was the Major satisfied with his position and resources. The scene by the Pool had taught him that he would have a stiff fight. He had been hard hit by Harry's shrewd suggestion that he must ask Iver himself for the means of proving what he meant to tell Iver. The only alternative, however, was to procure money for the necessary investigations from his niece ; and his niece, though comfortably off, was not rich. Nor was she any longer zealous in the cause. The Imp was sulky and sullen with him, sorry she had ever touched the affair at all, ready, he suspected, to grasp at any excuse for letting it drop. This temper of hers foreboded a refusal to open her purse. It was serious in another way. Of himself Duplay knew nothing ; Mina was his only witness ; her evidence, though really second-hand, was undoubtedly weighty ; it would at least make inquiries necessary. But would she give it ? Duplay was conscious that she was capable of turning round on him and declaring that she had made a blunder. If she did that, what would happen ? Duplay was sure that Harry had formal proofs, good and valid *prima facie* ; he would need Mina, money, and time to upset them. There were moments when the Major himself wished that he had relied on his own attractions, and not challenged Harry to battle on any issue save their respective power to win Janie Iver's affections. But it seemed too late to go back. Besides, he was in a rage with Harry ; his defeat by the Pool rankled. Harry, as usual, had spared his enemy none of the bitterness of defeat ; Duplay would now take pleasure in humbling him for the sake of the triumph itself, apart from its effect on the Ivers, father and daughter. But could he do

it ? He abode by the conclusion that he was bound to try, but he was not happy in it.

Harry's attitude would be simple. He would at the proper time produce his certificates, testifying to the death of Sir Randolph, the marriage of his parents, his own birth. The copies were in perfect order and duly authenticated ; they were evidence in themselves ; the originals could be had and would bear out the copies. All this had been well looked after, and Duplay did not doubt it. What had he to set against it ? Only that the third certificate was false, and that somewhere—neither he nor even Mina knew where—bearing some dates—neither he nor Mina knew what—there must be two other certificates—one fatal to Harry's case as fixing his birth at an earlier date, the other throwing at least grave suspicion on it by recording a second ceremony of marriage. But where were these certificates ? Conceivably they had been destroyed ; that was not likely, but it was possible. At any rate, to find them would need much time and some money. On reflection, the Major could not blame Harry for defying him by the Pool.

It will be seen that the information which Mina had gleaned from her mother, and filled in from her own childish recollection, was not so minute in the matter of dates as that which Madame de Kries had given at the time of the events to Mr Cholderton, and which was now locked away in the drawer at Mr Jenkinson Neeld's chambers. The Major would have been materially assisted by the sight of that document ; it would have narrowed the necessary area of inquiry and given a definiteness to his assertions which must have carried added weight with Mr Iver. As it was, he began to be convinced that Mina would decline to remember any dates even approximately, and this was all she had professed to do in her first disclosure. Duplay acknowledged that, as matters stood, the betting was in favour of his adversary.

Mina, being sulky, would not talk to her uncle ; she could not talk to Janie Iver ; she did not see Harry, and would not have dared to talk to him if she had. But it need hardly be said that she was dying to talk to somebody. With such matters on hand, she struggled against silence like soda-water against the cork. Merely to stare down at Blent and wonder what was happening there whetted a curiosity it could not satisfy. She

felt out of the game, and the feeling was intolerable. As a last resort, in a last effort to keep in touch with it, although she had been warned that she would find nothing of interest to her in the volume, she telegraphed to a bookseller in London to send her Mr Cholderton's Journal. It came the day after it was published, four days after she had made Mr Neeld's acquaintance, and while Lady Tristram, contrary to expectation, still held death at arm's length and lay looking at her own picture. The next morning Neeld received a pressing invitation to go to tea at Merrion Lodge. Without a moment's hesitation he went ; with him too all resolutions to know and to care nothing further about the matter vanished before the first chance of seeing more of it. And Mina had been Mina de Kries.

She received him in the library ; the Journal lay on the table. Something had restored animation to her manner and malice to her eyes ; those who knew her well would have conjectured that she saw her way to making somebody uncomfortable. But there was also an underlying nervousness which seemed to hint at something beyond. She began by flattering her visitor outrageously and indulging in a number of false statements regarding her delight with the Journal and the amusement and instruction she had gained from it ; she even professed to have mastered the Hygroxeric Method, observing that a note by the editor put the whole thing in a nutshell. Much pleased, yet vaguely disappointed, Mr Neeld concluded that she had no more to say about the visit to Heidelberg.

The Imp turned over the pages leisurely while Neeld sipped his tea.

" I see you put little asterisk things where you leave out anything," she observed. " That's convenient, isn't it ? "

" I think it's usual," said he.

" And another thing you do—Oh, you really are a splendid editor !—you put the date at the top of every page—even where Mr Cholderton's entry runs over ever so many pages. He is rather long sometimes, isn't he ? "

" I've always found the date at the top of the page a convenience in reading myself," said Mr Neeld.

" Yes, it tells you just where you are—and where Mr Cholderton was." She laughed a little. " Yes, look here, page 365, May 1875, he's at Berlin ! Then there are some

asterisks "—Mr Neeld looked up from his tea—" and you turn over the page " (the Imp turned over with the air of a discoverer), " and you find him at Interlaken in—why, in August, Mr Neeld ! " An amiable surprise appeared on her face. " Where was he in between ? " she asked.

" I—I suppose he stayed at Berlin."

" Oh, perhaps. No—look here. He says, ' I had not previously met Sir Silas Minting, as I left Berlin before he arrived in the beginning of June.' "

The Imp laid down the Journal, leant back in her chair, and regarded Neeld steadily.

" You told me right," she added ; " I don't find any mention of my mother—nor of Heidelberg. It's rather funny that he doesn't mention Heidelberg."

She poured out a second cup of tea and—waited. The first part of her work was done. She had made Neeld very uncomfortable. " Because," she added, after she had given her previous remarks time to soak in, " between May and August 1875 is just about the time I remember him at Heidelberg—the time when he met Mrs Fitzhubert, you know."

She nodded her head slightly toward the window, the window that looked down to the valley and gave a view of the house where Lady Tristram lay. Mina was keenly excited now. Had the Journal told Neeld anything ? Was that the meaning of his asterisks ?

" There was something about his visit to Heidelberg, but it contained nothing of public interest, Madame Zabriska, and in my discretion I omitted it."

" Why didn't you tell me that the other day ? You gave me to understand that he only mentioned Heidelberg casually."

" I may have expressed myself——"

" And did he mention us ? "

Neeld rose to his feet and took a turn up and down the room.

" In my discretion I left the passage out. I can answer no questions about it. Please don't press me, Madame Zabriska."

" I will know," she said excitedly, almost angrily.

Neeld came to a stand opposite her, deep perplexity expressing itself in his look and manner.

" Did he talk about us ? Did he talk about Lady Tristram ? "

"I am speaking to you, and to you only, Madame Zabriska?"

"Yes, yes—to me only."

"He did mention you, and he did speak of Lady Tristram."

"That's why you weren't surprised when I told you he called me the Imp!" She smiled a moment, and Neeld smiled too. But in an instant she was eager again. "And about Lady Tristram?"

"It was no use reprinting poor Lady Tristram's story." He sat down again, trying to look as though the subject were done with; but he rubbed his hands together nervously and would not meet Mina's eyes. There was a long pause; Mina rose, took the Journal, put it in the cupboard and turned the key on it. She came back and stood over him.

"You know?" she said. "It was in the Journal? I'm sure you know."

"Know what?" Mr Neeld was fighting in the last ditch.

"But I don't want to tell you unless you know! No, I'm sure you know!"

"And do you know?"

"Yes, I know. My mother told me."

They understood one another now. Neeld made no further pretence.

"You mean about Harry Tristram?" he asked simply, but in a low voice.

"Yes. At first I didn't know what it meant to him. But I know now."

Neeld made no reply, and there was another moment of silence. Neeld wore a restless, timid, uneasy air, in strong contrast to the resolute intensity of Mina's manner; she seemed to have taken and to keep the upper hand of him.

"And you know what it would mean to him?" she asked.

Neeld nodded; of course he knew that.

"What are you going to do?"

He raised his hands and let them drop again in a confession that he did not know.

"I knew, and I told," she said. He started a little. "Yes, I told, because I was spiteful. I was the Imp! I've never been happy since I told. Mr Tristram knows I've told, though he denies there's anything in it. But he knows I've told. And still he's been kind to me." Her voice shook.

" You told ? Whom did you tell ? "

" Never mind—or guess, if you can. I shan't tell him any more. I shan't help him any more. I won't speak. I will not speak. I'm for Mr Tristram. Thick and thin, I'm for Mr Tristram now." She came a step nearer to him. " The man I told may try ; but I don't think he can do much without us—without me and without you. If we keep quiet, no, he can't do much. Why should we tell ? Is it our business ? You suppressed it in the Journal. Can't you suppress it now ? "

" The Ivers ? " he stammered.

" The Ivers ! What's it to the Ivers compared to what it is to him ? It'll never come out. If it did—— Oh, but it won't ! It's life and death to him. And isn't it right ? Isn't it justice ? He's her son. This thing's just a horrible accident. Oh, if you'd heard him speak of Blent ! " She paused a moment, rubbing her hand across her eyes. Then she threw herself back into her chair, asking again, " What are you going to do ? "

He sat silent, thinking hard. It was not his business. Right and justice seemed, in some sense at least, on Harry's side. But the law is the law. And there were his friends the Ivers. In him there was no motive of self-interest such as had swayed Major Duplay and made his action seem rather ugly even to himself. Neeld owed loyalty and friendship ; that was all. Was it loyal, was it friendly, to utter no word while friends were deceived ? With what face would he greet Iver if the thing did come out afterward ? He debated with entire sincerity the point that Major Duplay had invoked in defence of himself against his conscience. On the other side was the strong sympathy which that story in the Journal had created in him since first he read it and realized its perverse little tragedy ; and there was the thought of Lady Tristram dying down at Blent.

The long silence was broken by neither of them. Neeld was weighing his question ; Mina had made her appeal and waited for an answer. The quiet of the book-lined room (there were the yellowy-brown volumes from which Mina had acquired her lore !) was broken by a new voice. They both started to hear it, and turned alert faces to the window whence it came. Harry Tristram, in flannels and a straw hat, stood looking in.

" I've got an hour off," he explained, " so I walked up to thank you for the flowers. My mother liked them, and liked

to have them from you." He saw Neeld, and greeted him courteously. " I asked her if I should give you her love, and she said yes—with her eyes, you know. She speaks mostly that way now. Well, she always did a good deal, I expect." His smile came on the last words.

" She sent her love to me ? "

" Yes. I told her what you did one evening, and she liked that too."

" I hope Lady Tristram is—er—going on well ? " asked Neeld.

" She doesn't suffer, thank you."

Mina invited him in ; there was an appositeness in his coming which appealed to her, and she watched Neeld with covert eagerness.

Harry looked round the room, then vaulted over the sill.

" My uncle's playing golf with Mr Iver," remarked Mina. " Tea ? "

" No ; too sick-roomy. I'm for nothing but strong drink now—and I've had some." He came to the middle of the room and stood between them, flinging his hat on the table where Mr Cholderton's Journal had so lately lain. " My mother's an extraordinary woman," he went on, evidently so full of his thought that he must speak it out ; " she's dying joyfully."

After an instant Mina asked, " Why ? " Neeld was surprised at the baldness of the question, but Harry took it as natural.

" It's like going off guard—I mean, rather, off duty—to her, I think." He made the correction thoughtfully and with no haste. " Life has always seemed rather like an obligation to do things you don't want to—not that she did them all—and now she's tired, she's glad to leave it to me. Only she wishes I was a bit better-looking, though she won't admit it. She couldn't stand a downright ugly man at Blent, you know. I've a sort of notion "—he seemed to forget Neeld, and looked at Mina for sympathy—" that she thinks she'll be able to come and have a look at Blent and me in it, all the same." His smile took a whimsical turn as he spoke of his mother's dying fancies.

Mina glanced at Mr Neeld ; was the picture visible to him that rose before her eyes—of the poor sprite coming eagerly,

but turning sadly away when she saw a stranger enthroned at Blent, and knew not where to look for her homeless landless son? Mina was not certain that she could safely credit Neeld with such a flight of imagination; still he was listening, and his eyes were very gentle behind his spectacles.

"The parson came to see her yesterday. He's not what you'd call an unusual man, Madame Zabriska—and she is an unusual woman, you know. It was—yes, it was amusing, and there's an end of it." He paused, and added, by way of excuse, "Oh, I know her so well, you see. She wouldn't be left alone with him; she wanted another sinner there."

Mina marked the change in him—the new expansiveness, the new appeal for sympathy. He had forgotten his suspicions and his watchfulness; she was inclined to say that he had forgotten himself. On her death-bed Addie Tristram had exerted her charm once more—and over her own son. Once more a man, whatever his own position, thought mainly of her—and that man was her son. Did Neeld see this? To Neeld it came as the strongest reinforcement to the feelings which bade him hold his peace. It seemed an appeal to him, straight from the death-bed in the valley below. Harry found the old gentleman's gaze fixed intently on him.

"I beg your pardon for troubling you with all this, Mr Neeld," he said, relapsing rather into his defensive attitude. "Madame Zabriska knows my ways."

"No, I don't think I know this new way of yours at all," she objected. "But I like it, Mr Tristram. I feel all you do. I have seen her." She turned to Neeld. "Oh, how I wish you had!" she cried.

Her earnestness stirred a little curiosity in Harry. He glanced with his old wariness at Neeld. But what could he see save a kindly precise old gentleman, who was unimportant to him but seemed interested in what he said. He turned back to Mina, asking:

"A new way of mine?"

"Well, not quite. You were rather like it once. But generally you've got a veil before your face. Or perhaps you're really changed?"

He thought for a moment. "Things change a man." And he added, "I'm only twenty-two."

" Yes, I know," she smiled, " though I constantly forget it all the same."

" Well, twenty-three, come the twentieth of July," said he. His eyes were on hers, his characteristic smile on his lips. It was a challenge to her.

" I shan't forget the date," she answered, answering his look too. He sighed lightly ; he was assured that she was with him.

The twentieth of July ! The editor of Mr Cholderton's Journal sat by listening ; he raised no voice in protest.

" I must get back," said Harry. " Walk with me to the dip of the hill."

With a glance of apology to Neeld, she followed him and stepped out of the window ; there were two steps at the side leading up to it. " I'll be back directly," she cried over her shoulder, as she joined Harry Tristram. They walked to the gate which marked the end of the terrace on which Merrion stood.

" I'm so glad you came ! You do believe in me now ? " she asked.

" Yes, and I'm not afraid. But do you know—it seems incredible to me—I'm not thinking of that now. I shall again directly, when it's over. But now—well, Blent won't seem much without my mother."

" She couldn't rest if you weren't there," cried Mina, throwing back the impression she had received, as her disposition made her.

" I haven't changed about that, but it will wait. Three days they say now—three days, or maybe four, and then—she goes."

Together they stood, looking down. Mina's heart was very full. She was with the Tristrams indeed now, thick and thin ; their cause seemed hers, their house must stand.

Harry turned to her suddenly.

" Say nothing of this to the Major. Let him alone ; that's best. We'll see about all that afterward. Good-bye."

" And—and the Ivers ? " She could not restrain the question.

A slight frown came on his brow ; he seemed to have no relish for the subject.

" Oh, that'll wait too," he said impatiently. He caught her by the arm as he had done once before. " If all they said was

true, if what you think was true (he smiled at her as he spoke), I'd change with no man in England ; remember that. If it comes to a fight and I'm beaten, remember that." And he ran down the hill.

Mina returned slowly to the library and found Neeld walking restlessly to and fro. For the moment they did not speak. Mina sat down and followed the old gentleman's figure in its restless pacing.

" You heard him about his mother ? " she asked at last.

He nodded, but did not reply.

" You make all the difference," she blurted out after another pause.

Again he nodded, not ceasing his walk. For a minute or two longer Mina endured the suspense, though it seemed more than she could bear. Then she sprang up, ran to him, intercepted him, and caught hold of both his hands, arresting his progress with an eager imperious grip.

" Well ? " she cried. " Well ? What are you going to do ? "

For a moment still he waited. Then he spoke deliberately.

" I can't consider it my duty to do anything, Madame Zabriska."

" Ah ! " cried the Imp in shrill triumph, and she flung her arms round his neck and kissed him. She did not mind his putting it on the score of duty.

CHAPTER IX

The Man in Possession

IN these days Janie Iver would have been lonely but for the Major's attentions. Her father had gone to London on business—showing, to Mr Neeld's relief, no disposition to take the Journal with him to read on the way—Neeld was absurdly nervous about the Journal now. Her mother was engrossed in a notable scheme which Miss Swinkerton had started for the benefit of the poor of Blentmouth. Bible-readings, a savings-bank, and cottage-gardens were so inextricably mingled in it that the beneficiary, if she liked one, had to go in for them all. " Just my object," Miss Swinkerton would remark triumphantly as she set the flower-pots down on the Bibles, only to find that the bank-books had got stored away with the seed. Clearly Mrs Iver, chief *aide-de-camp*, had no leisure. Harry was at Blent ; no word and no sign came from him. Bob Broadley never made advances. The field was clear for the Major. Janie, grateful for his attentions, yet felt vaguely that he was more amusing as one of two attentive cavaliers than when he was her only resource. A sense of flatness came over her sometimes. In fact, the centre of interest had shifted from her ; she no longer held the stage ; it was occupied now, for the few days she had still to live, by Lady Tristram. Moreover, Duplay was puzzling. Although not a girl who erected every attention or every indication of liking into an obligation to propose matrimony, Janie knew that after a certain point things of this kind were supposed to go either forward or backward, not to remain *in statu quo*. If her own bearing toward Bob contradicted this general rule—well, that was an exceptional case. In Duplay's instance she could see nothing exceptional. She herself was not eager for a final issue —indeed, that would probably be brought about in another way —but, knowing nothing of his diplomatic reasons for delay, she thought he ought to be. It is not very flattering when a gentleman takes too long over considering such a matter ; a touch of impetuosity is more becoming. She would have preferred

that he should need to be put off, and failed to understand why (if it may be so expressed) he put himself off from day to day.

But Duplay's reasons were, in fact, overwhelming. Lady Tristram lived still, and he had the grace to count that as the strongest motive for holding his hand. Harry's campaign was for the moment at a standstill ; Duplay had no doubt he would resume it as soon as his mother was buried ; on its apparent progress the Major's action would depend. It was just possible that he could defeat his enemy without his secret weapon ; in that event he pictured himself writing a letter to Harry, half sorrowful, half magnanimous, in which he would leave that young man to settle matters with his conscience, and, for his own part, wash his hands of the whole affair. But his conviction was that there would come a critical moment at which he could go to Iver, not (as he must now) without any compelling reason, but in the guise of a friend who acts reluctantly yet under an imperious call. What would happen if he did ? Victory, he used to repeat to himself. But often his heart sank. Mina was with him no more ; he never thought of Neeld as a possible ally ; Harry's position was strong. Among the reasons for inactivity which Duplay did not acknowledge to himself was the simple and common one that he was in his heart afraid to act. He meant to act, but he shrank from it and postponed the hour as long as he could. Defeat would be very ignominious ; and he could not deny that defeat was possible merely from want of means to carry on the war. When the Major recognized this fact he was filled with a sombre indignation at the inequalities of wealth, and at the ways of a world wherein not even Truth shall triumph unless she commands a big credit at the bank.

And Mina annoyed him intensely, assuming an aggrieved air, and hinting severe moral condemnation in every glance of her eye. She behaved for all the world as though the Major had begun the whole thing, and entirely ignored her own responsibility. She conveyed the view that he was the unscrupulous assailant, she the devoted defender, of the Tristrams. Such a *volte-face* as this was not only palpably unjust, it was altogether too nimble a bit of gymnastics for Duplay to appreciate. The general unreasonableness of woman was his only

refuge ; but the dogma could not bring understanding, much less consolation, with it.

" What did you tell me for, then ? " he cried at last. " You were hot on it then. Now you say you won't help me, you'll have nothing more to do with it ! "

" I only told it you as—as a remarkable circumstance," the Imp alleged, with a wanton disregard for truth.

" Nonsense, Mina. You were delighted to have a weapon against young Tristram then."

" I can't help it if you insist on misunderstanding me, uncle ; and, anyhow, I suppose I can change my mind if I like, can't I ? "

" No," he declared, " it's not fair to me. I can't make you out at all. You're not in love with Harry Tristram, are you ? "

" With that boy ? " asked Mina, attempting to be superb.

" That's women's old nonsense," observed Duplay, twirling his moustache knowingly. " They often fall in love with young men and always try to pass it off by calling them boys."

" Of course I haven't your experience, uncle," she rejoined, passing into the sarcastic vein.

" And if you are," he went on, reverting to the special case, " I don't see why you make his path smooth to Janie Iver."

" Some people are capable of self-sacrifice in their love."

" Yes, but I shouldn't think you'd be one of them," said the Major rather rudely. He looked at her curiously. Her interest in Harry was unmistakable, her championship of him had become thorough-going, fierce, and (to the Major's mind) utterly unscrupulous. Was he faced with a situation so startlingly changed ? Did his niece object to turning Harry off his throne because she harboured a hope of sharing it with him ? If that were so, and if the hope had any chance of becoming a reality, Duplay would have to reconsider his game. But what chance of success could there be ? She would (he put it bluntly in his thoughts) only be making a fool of herself.

The Imp screwed up her little lean face into a grimace which served effectually to cover any sign of her real feelings. She neither admitted nor denied the charge levied against her. She was bewildering her uncle, and she found, as usual, a genuine pleasure in the pursuit. If she were also bewildering herself a little with her constant thoughts of Harry Tristram and her ardent championship of his cause, well, in the country there is

such a thing as being too peaceful, and up to the present time the confusion of feeling had been rather pleasant than painful.

" I don't really know what I feel," she remarked the next moment. " But you can read women, uncle, you've often said so, and I dare say you really know more about what I feel than I do myself." A grossness of innocence was her new assumption. " Now, judging from what I do and look—that's the way to judge, isn't it, not from what I say ?—what do you think my real inmost feelings are about Mr Tristram ? "

If the Major had been asked what his real inmost feelings about his niece were at the moment, he would have been at some difficulty to express them decorously. She was back at fifteen—a particularly exasperating child of fifteen. Her great eyes, with their mock gravity, were fixed on his irritated face. He would have agreed absolutely with Mr Cholderton's estimate of the evil in her, and of its proper remedy.

Wherein Duplay was derided his niece made very plain to him ; wherein his words had any effect was studiously concealed. Yet she repeated the words when he had, with a marked failure of temper, gone his way and slammed the door behind him. " In love with Harry Tristram ! " Mina found the idea at once explanatory and picturesque. Why otherwise was she his champion ? She paused (as they say) for a reply. How better could she draw to herself a part and a share in the undoubtedly romantic situation in which she grouped the facts of the case ? By being in love with Harry she became part of the drama ; and she complicated the drama most delightfully. Janie knew nothing—she knew everything. Janie hesitated —what if she did not hesitate ? A big *rôle* opened before her eyes. What if it were very unlikely that Harry would reciprocate her proposed feelings ? The Imp hesitated between a natural vexation and an artistic pleasure. Such a failure on his part would wound the woman, but it would add pathos to the play. She became almost sure that she could love Harry ; she remained uncertain whether he should return the compliment. And, after all, to be Lady Tristram of Blent ! That was attractive. Or (in case Harry suffered defeat) to be Lady Tristram of Blent in the sight of heaven (a polite and time-honoured way of describing an arrangement not recognized on earth, and quite adaptable to the present circumstances) ; that

had a hardly less alluring, and at least a rarer, flavour. The Imp looked down on Blent with an access of interest. Monsieur Zabriska had left her with unexhausted reserves of feeling. Moreover, she could not be expected to help her uncle if she were seriously attached to Harry. The moral of all this for the Major was that it is unwise to suggest courses of action unless you are willing to see them carried out, or channels of emotion unless you are prepared to find them filled.

" Some people are capable of self-sacrifice in their love." That would mean being his champion still, and letting him marry Janie Iver. She did not object much to her own part, but she cavilled suddenly at Janie's—or at Harry's relation to Janie. Would it be better to share adversity with him ? Perhaps. But, after all, she did not fancy him in adversity. The third course recommended itself—victory for him, but not Janie. Who then ?

At this point Mina became sensible of no more than the vaguest visions, not at all convincing even to herself. By a sad deficiency of imagination, she could give no definiteness to a picture of Harry Tristram making love. He had never, to her mind, looked like it with Janie Iver, even while he had purported to be doing it. He never looked like it at all, not even as though he could do it. Stay, though ! That new way of his, which she had marked when he came up the hill to thank her for the flowers, was an exception. But the new way had been for his mother's sake. Now a man cannot be in love with his mother. The question grew more puzzling, more annoying, more engrossing still.

While full of these problems, refusing indeed to be anything else, Mina was surprised by a visit from Miss Swinkerton, who sought a subscription for the scheme of which an inadequate account has already been given. Miss Swinkerton (for some reason she was generally known as Miss S., a vulgar style of description possessing sometimes an inexplicable appropriateness) was fifty-five, tall and bony, the daughter of a rear-admiral, the sister of an archdeacon. She lived for good works and by gossip. Mina's sovereign (foreigners will not grasp the cheap additional handsomeness of a guinea) duly disbursed, conversation became general—that is to say, they talked about their neighbours.

" A hard young man," said Miss S. (Why be more genteel than her friends ?) " And if Janie Iver thinks he's in love with her——"

" What do you mean by being in love, Miss Swinkerton ? "

Miss Swinkerton had always been rather surprised, not to say hurt, when the Catechism asked for an explanation of what she meant by the Lord's Prayer. This question of Mina's was still more uncalled for.

" You know enough English, my dear——"

" It's not a question of English," interrupted Mina, " but of human nature, Miss Swinkerton."

" When I was a girl there were no such questions."

" What about Lady Tristram, then ? "

There was flattery in this, ten or fifteen years of flattery. Miss S. was unmoved.

" I am happy to say that Lady Tristram never called at Seaview." Miss S.'s house was called Seaview—Sea-Backview would have been a more precise description.

" I call him in love with Janie Iver. He must want to marry her or——"

" They do say that money isn't very plentiful at Blent. And there'll be the Death Duties, you know."

" What are they ? " asked Mina.

" Like stamps," explained Miss S. vaguely. " For my part, I think it's lucky he is what he is. There's been enough of falling in love in the Tristram family. If you ask me who is in love with her, of course it's poor young Broadley. Well, you know that, as you're always driving up to Mingham with her."

" We've only been three or four times, Miss Swinkerton."

" Six, I was told," observed Miss S., with an air of preferring accuracy. " Oh, I should be very pleased to see him married to Janie—Mr Tristram I mean, of course—but she mustn't expect too much, my dear. Where's your uncle ? "

" At Fairholme, I expect," answered the Imp demurely. As a matter of fact the Major had gone to Exeter on a business errand.

" Fairholme ? " Miss S.'s air was significant, Mina's falsehood rewarded. Mina threw out a smile ; her visitor's pursed lips responded to it.

" He goes there a lot," pursued Mina, " to play golf with Mr Iver."

" So I've heard." Her tone put the report in its proper place. To play golf indeed !

" I think Janie's rather fond of Mr Tristram, anyhow." This was simply a feeler on Mina's part.

" Well, my dear, the position ! Blent's been under a cloud —though people don't seem to mind that much nowadays, to be sure. But the new Lady Tristram ! They've always been the heads of the neighbourhood. She'll have him, no doubt, but as for being in love with him—well, could you, Madame Zabriska ? "

" Yes," said the Imp, without the least hesitation. " I think he's most attractive—mysterious, you know. I'm quite taken with him."

" He always looks at me as if I wanted to pick his pocket."

" Well, you generally do—for your charities." The laugh was confined to Mina herself. " But I know the manner you mean."

" Poor young man ! I'm told he's very sensitive about his mother. That's it perhaps." The guess was at all events as near as gossip generally gets to truth. " It would make him a very uncomfortable sort of husband though, even if one didn't mind having that kind of story in the family."

With a flash of surprise—really she had not been thinking about herself, in spite of her little attempts to mystify Miss S. —Mina caught that lady indulging in a very intent scrutiny of her, which gave an obvious point to her last words and paved the way (as it appeared in a moment) for a direct approach to the principal object of Miss S.'s visit. That this object did not come to the front till Miss S. was on her feet to go was quite characteristic.

" I'm really glad, my dear," she observed, hanging her silk bag on her arm, " to have had this talk with you. They do say such things, and now I shall be able to contradict them on the best authority."

" What do they say ? "

" Well, I never repeat things ; still I think perhaps you've a right to know. They do say that you're more interested in Harry Tristram than a mere neighbour would be, and—well, really, I don't quite know how to put it."

"Oh, I do!" cried Mina, delightedly hitting the mark. "That uncle and I are working together, I suppose?"

"I don't listen to such gossip, but it comes to my ears," Miss S. admitted.

"What diplomatists we are!" said the Imp. "I didn't know we were so clever. But why do I take Janie to Mingham?"

"They'd say that Bob Broadley's no real danger, and if it *should* disgust Harry Tristram——"

"I am clever! Dear Miss Swinkerton, I never thought of anything half so good myself. I'll tell uncle about it directly."

Miss S. looked at her suspiciously. The innocence seemed very much over-done.

"I knew you'd laugh at it," she observed.

"I should do that even if it was true," said Mina, thoroughly enjoying herself.

Miss S. took her leave, quite undecided whether to announce on the best authority that the idea was true, or that it was quite unfounded. One thing only was certain: whatever she decided to say, she would say on the best authority. If it turned out incorrect in the end, Miss S. would take credit for an impenetrable discretion and an unswerving loyalty to the friends who had given her their confidence.

Mina was left very unquiet. Miss S. chimed in with the Major; the neighbourhood too seemed in the same tune. She could laugh at the ingenuities attributed to her, yet the notions which had given them birth found, as she perceived more and more clearly, a warrant in her feelings, if not in her conduct. Look at it how she would, she was wrapped up in Harry Tristram; she spent her days watching his fortunes, any wakeful hour of the night found her occupied in thinking of him. Was she a traitor to her friend Janie Iver? Was that treachery bringing her back, by a roundabout way, to a new alliance with her uncle? Did it involve treason to Harry himself? For certainly it was hard to go on helping him toward a marriage with Janie Iver.

"But I will all the same if he wants it," she exclaimed, as she paced about on the terrace, glancing now and then down at Blent. And again she stood aghast at the thorough-going devotion which such an attitude as that implied. "If only I

could keep out of things ! " she murmured. " But I never can."

Major Duplay drove up the hill in a Blentmouth station fly ; he had met the doctor on the road, and the news was that in all probability Lady Tristram would not live out the night. The tidings gained added solemnity from Duplay's delivery of them, even though a larger share of his impressiveness was directed to the influence the event might have on his fortunes than to the event itself.

" Then we shall see. He'll assume the title, I suppose. That's no affair of mine. And then he'll go to Fairholme. That is——" He turned suddenly, almost threateningly, upon her. " I hope you've come to your senses, Mina," said he. " You'll have to speak, you know. If I can't make you, Iver will." He paused and laughed. " But you'll speak fast enough when you find yourself in the lawyer's office."

Mina refused to be frightened by the threatened terrors of the law.

" Who's going to take me to a lawyer's office ? " she demanded.

" Why, Iver will, of course." He showed contemptuous surprise. " Oh, you've gone too far to think you can get out of it now."

She studied him attentively for a moment or two. The result was reassuring ; his blustering manner hid, she believed, a sinking heart.

" You can't frighten me, uncle. I've made up my mind what to do, and I shall do it."

She was not afraid of him now. She was wondering how she had come to be bullied into telling her secret at all, looking back with surprise to that scene in the library when, with sullen obedience and childish fear, she had obeyed his command to speak. Why was it all different now ? Why was his attempt to take the same line with her not only a failure, but a ridiculous effort ? She knew the angry answer he would give. Could she give any other answer herself ? A new influence had come into her life. She had not ceased to be afraid, but she was afraid of somebody else. A domination was over her still, but it was no longer his. Like some turbulent little city of old Greece, she had made her revolution : the end had been to

saddle her with a new tyrant. There seemed no more use in denying it ; the Major said it, Miss S. said it, the neighbourhood was all agreed. What she herself was most conscious of, and oppressed by, was a sense of audacity. How dared she devote herself to Harry Tristram ? He had asked nothing of her. No, but he had imposed something on her. She had volunteered for his service. It was indeed " women's nonsense " when she spoke of him as " That boy."

Duplay turned away from her, disheartened and disgusted. Things looked well for the enemy. He was alone with his unsupported story of a conversation which Mina would not repeat, and his empty purse which could supply no means of proving what he said. He ran the risk of losing what chance he had of Janie Iver's favour, and he was in sore peril of coming off second-best again in his wrestling-bout with Harry Tristram. The Man in Possession was strong. The perils that had seemed so threatening were passing away. Mina was devoted ; Neeld would be silent. Who would there be who could effectively contest his claim, or oust him from his place ? Thus secure, he would hardly need the cheque always by him. Yet he was a cautious, wary young man. There was little doubt that he would still like to have the cheque by him, and that he would take the only means of getting it.

Now that the moment had come for which all his life had been a preparation, Harry Tristram had little reason to be afraid.

CHAPTER X

Behold the Heir!

ADDIE TRISTRAM died with all her old uncommonness. Death was to her an end more fully than it is to most; had she been herself responsible for it, she could hardly have thought less of any possible consequences. And it was to her such a beginning as it can seldom seem. She had been living in anticipation of dying, but in a sense utterly remote from that contemplation of their latter end which is enjoined on the pious. So that, together with an acquiescence so complete as almost to justify her son calling it joyful, there was an expectation, nearly an excitement—save that the tired body failed to second the mind. She might have shown remorse, both for her own acts and for the position in which she was leaving Harry; she fell in with the view he had always maintained with her, that all these things had come about somehow, and produced a certain state of affairs, and must be made to seem as if they had done nothing of the sort. During the last day or two she was delirious at intervals; as a precaution Harry was with her then, instead of the nurse. The measure was superfluous; there was nothing on Lady Tristram's mind, and when she spoke unconsciously, she spoke of trifles. The few final hours found her conscious and intelligent, although very weak. Just at the end a curious idea got hold of her. She was a little distressed that the Gainsboroughs were not there; she whispered her feeling to Harry apologetically, well remembering his objection to that branch of the family, and his disinclination to have them or any of them at Blent. "Cecily ought to be here," she murmured. Harry started a little; he was not accustomed in his own mind to concede Cecily any rights. His mother's fear of offending him by the suggestion was very obvious. "She'd come after you, you see, if——" she said once or twice. There did not pass between them a word of acknowledgment that Cecily ought to come before him. Yet he was left wondering whether that idea, so scorned before, had not won its way to

her with some sudden strength—as though an instinct for the true heir made itself felt in spite of all her resolution and all her prejudices, and forced her to do something toward recognizing the claims which they were both determined to thwart.

The barest hint of this kind would have raised Harry's suspicion and anger a few weeks before; the new mood which Mina Zabriska had marked in him made him take it quietly now, and even affectionately. For this Addie Tristram was grateful; she had always the rare grace of seeming surprised at her own power over men. It was no less in keeping with her character and her life that the feeling she suffered under, and manifested, was very easily appeased. Harry promised to ask the Gainsboroughs to her funeral. Addie Tristram's conscientious scruples were entirely laid to rest; with a sigh of peace she settled herself to die. It was the feudal feeling, Harry decided, which insisted that the family must not be ignored; it did not deny their humble position, or the gulf that separated them from the succession. Yet he was vaguely vexed, even while he agreed to what she wanted.

So she passed away in the full tide of the darkness of night. The doctor had left her some hours before, the nurse had been sent to bed, for there was nothing that could be done. Harry was alone with her; he kissed her when she was dead, and stood many minutes by her, looking from her to the picture of her that hung on the wall. A strange loneliness was on him, a loneliness which there seemed nobody to solace. He had said that Blent would not be much without his mother. That was not quite right; it was much, but different. She had carried away with her the atmosphere of the place, the essence of the life that he had lived there with her. Who would make that the same to him again? Suddenly he recollected that in four days he was to ask Janie Iver for her answer. Say a week now, for the funeral would enforce or excuse so much postponement. Janie Iver would not give him back the life or the atmosphere. A description of how he felt, had it been related to him a year ago, would have appeared an absurdity. Yet these crowding unexpected thoughts made not a hair's breadth of difference in what he purposed. It was only that he became aware of an irreparable change of scene; there was to be no change in his action. He was Tristram of Blent now—that

he must and would remain. But it was not the same Blent, and did not seem as though it could be again. So much of the poetry had gone out of it with Addie Tristram.

After he had left her room, he walked through the house, carrying a shaded candle in his hand along the dark corridors of shining oak. He bent his steps toward the Long Gallery which filled all the upper floor of the left wing. Here was the Valhalla and the treasure-house of the Tristrams, the pictures of ancestors, the cases of precious things which the ancestors had amassed. At the end of this gallery Addie Tristram had used to sit when she was well, in a large high-backed armchair by the big window that commanded the gardens and the river. He flung the window open and stood looking out. The wind swished in the trees and the Blent washed along leisurely. A beautiful stillness was about him. It was as though she were by his side, her fair head resting against the old brocade cover of the armchair, her eyes wandering in delighted employment round the room she had loved so well. Who should sit there next? As he looked now at the room, now out into the night, his eyes filled suddenly with tears; the love of the place came back to him, his pride in it lived again, he would keep it not only because it was his but because it had been hers before him. His blood spoke strong in him. Suddenly he smiled: it was at the thought that all this belonged in law to Miss Cecily Gainsborough—the house, the gallery, the pictures, the treasures, the very chair where Addie Tristram had used to sit. Every stick and stone about the place was Cecily Gainsborough's, aye, and the bed of the Blent from shore to shore. He had nothing at all—according to law.

Well, the law must have some honour, some recognition at all events. The Gainsboroughs should, as he had promised, be asked to the funeral. They should be invited with all honour and most formally, in the name of Tristram of Blent—which by the by was, according to law, also Miss Cecily Gainsborough's. Harry had no name according to law; no more than he had houses or pictures or treasures, any stick or stone, or the smallest heritage in the bed of the Blent. He had been son to the mistress of it all; she was gone and he was nobody —according to law. It was, after all, a reasonable concession that his mother had urged on him; the Gainsboroughs ought

to be asked to the funeral. The last of his vexation on this score died away into a sense of grim amusement at Addie Tristram's wish and his own appreciation of it. He had no sense of danger; Tristram had succeeded to Tristram; all was well.

Little inclined to sleep, he went down into the garden presently, lit his cigar, and strolled on to the bridge. The night had grown clearer and some stars showed in the sky; it was nearly one o'clock. He had stood where he was only a few moments when, to his surprise, he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs on the road from Blentmouth. Thinking the doctor, who often did his rounds in the saddle, might have returned, he crossed the bridge, opened the gate, and stood on the high road. The rider came up in a few minutes and drew rein at the sight of his figure, but, as Harry did not move, made as though he would ride on again with no more than the customary country salute of "Good night."

"Who is it?" asked Harry, peering through the darkness.

"Me—Bob Broadley," was the answer.

"You're late."

"I've been at the Club at Blentmouth. The Cricket Club's Annual Dinner, you know."

"Ah, I forgot."

Bob, come to a standstill, was taking the opportunity of lighting his pipe. This done, he looked up at the house and back to Harry rather timidly.

"Lady Tristram—— ?" he began.

"My mother has been dead something above an hour," said Harry.

After a moment Bob dismounted and threw his reins over the gatepost.

"I'm sorry, Tristram," he said, holding out his hand. "Lady Tristram was always very kind to me. Indeed she was that to everybody." He paused a moment and then went on slowly. "It must seem strange to you. Why, I remember when my father died I felt—besides the sorrow, you know—sort of lost at coming into my bit of land at Mingham. But you——" Harry could see his head turn as he looked over the demesne of Blent and struggled to give some expression to the thoughts which his companion's position

suggested. The circumstances of this meeting made for sincerity and openness ; they were always Bob's characteristics. Harry, too, was in such a mood that he liked Bob to stay and talk a little.

They fell into talk with more ease and naturalness than they had recently achieved together, getting back to the friendliness of boyhood, although Bob still spoke as to one greater than himself and infused a little deference into his manner. But they came to nothing intimate till Bob had declared that he must be on his way and was about to mount his horse.

" As soon as I begin to have people here, I hope you'll come often," said Harry cordially. " Naturally we shall be a little more lively than we've been able to be of late, and I shall hope to see all my friends."

He did not instantly understand the hesitation in Bob's manner as he answered : " You're very kind. I—I shall like to come."

" Blent must do its duty," Harry pursued.

Bob turned back to him, leaving his horse again. " Yes, I'll come. I hope I know how to take a licking, Tristram." He held out his hand.

" A licking ? " Both the word and the gesture seemed to surprise Harry Tristram.

" Oh, you know what I mean. You're engaged to her, aren't you ? Or as good as anyhow ? I don't want to ask questions——"

" Not even as good as, yet," answered Harry slowly.

" Of course you know what I feel. Everybody knows that, though I've never talked about it—even to her."

" Why not to her ? Isn't that rather usual in such cases ? " Harry was smiling now.

" It would only worry her. What chance should I have ? "

" Well, I don't agree with being too humble."

" Oh, I don't know that I'm humble. Perhaps I think myself as good a man as you. But "—he laughed a little— " I'm Broadley of Mingham, not Tristram of Blent."

" I see. That's it ? And our friend the Major ? "

" I shouldn't so much mind having a turn-up with the Major."

" But Tristram of Blent is—is too much ? "

"It's not your fault, you can't help it," smiled Bob. "You're born to it and——" He ended with a shrug.

"You're very fond of her?" Harry asked, frowning a little.

"I've been in love with her all my life—ever since they came to Seaview. Fairholme wasn't dreamed of then."

He spoke of Fairholme with a touch of bitterness which he hastened to correct by adding—"Of course I'm glad of their good luck."

"You mean, if it were Seaview still and not Fairholme——?"

"No, I don't. I've no business to think anything of the sort, and I don't think it," Bob interposed quickly. "You asked me a question and I answered it. I'm not in a position to know anything about you, and I'm not going to say anything."

"A good many reasons enter into a marriage sometimes," remarked Harry.

"Yes, with people like you. I know that."

His renewed reference to Harry's position brought another frown to Harry's face, but it was the frown of thoughtfulness, not of anger.

"I can't quarrel with the way of the world, and I'm sure if it does come off you'll be good to her."

"You think I don't care about her—about her herself?"

"I don't know, I tell you. I don't want to know. I suppose you like her."

"Yes, I like her." He took the word from Bob and made no attempt to alter or to amplify it.

Bob was mounting now; the hour was late for him to be abroad and work waited him in the morning.

"Good night, Tristram," he said, as he settled in his saddle.

"Good night. And, Bob, if by any chance it doesn't come off with me, you have that turn-up with the Major!"

"Well, I don't like the idea of a foreign chap coming down and—— But, mind you, Duplay's a very superior fellow. He knows the deuce of a lot."

"Thinks he does, anyhow," said Harry, smiling again. "Good night, old fellow," he called after Bob in a very friendly voice as horse and rider disappeared up the road.

"I must go to bed, I suppose," he muttered as he returned

to the bridge and stood leaning on the parapet. He yawned, not in weariness but in a reaction from the excitement of the last few days. His emotional mood had passed for the time at all events; it was succeeded by an apathy that was dull without being restful. And in its general effect his interview with Bob was vaguely vexatious in spite of its cordial character. It left with him a notion which he rejected but could not quite get rid of—the notion that he was taking, or (if all were known) would be thought to be taking, an unfair advantage. Bob had said he was born to it and that he could not help it. If that had indeed been so in the fullest possible sense, would he have had the notion that irritated him now? Yes, he told himself; but the answer did not quite convince. Still the annoyance was no more than a restless suggestion of something not quite satisfactory in his position, and worth mentioning only as the first such feeling he had ever had. It did not trouble him seriously. He smoked another cigar on the bridge and then went into the house and to bed. As he undressed it occurred to him (and the idea gave him both pleasure and amusement) that he had made a sort of alliance with Bob against Duplay, although it could come into operation only under circumstances which were very unlikely to happen.

The blinds drawn at Blent next morning told Mina what had happened, and the hour of eleven found her at a Committee Meeting at Miss Swinkerton's, which she certainly would not have attended otherwise. As it was, she wanted to talk and to hear, and the gathering afforded a chance. Mrs Iver was there, and Mrs Trumbler the Vicar's wife, a meek woman, rather ousted from her proper position by the energy of Miss Swinkerton; she was to manage the Bible-reading department, which was not nearly so responsible a task as conducting the savings-bank, and did not involve anything like the same amount of supervision of other people's affairs. Mrs Trumbler felt, however, that on matters of morals she had a claim to speak *jure mariti*.

"It is so sad!" she murmured. "And Mr Trumbler found he could do so little! He came home quite distressed."

"I'm told she wasn't the least sensible of her position," observed Miss S., with what looked rather like satisfaction.

"Didn't she know she was dying?" asked Mina, who had

established her footing by a hypocritical show of interest in the cottage-gardens.

"Oh, yes, she knew she was dying, my dear," said Miss S. What poor Lady Tristram might have known, but apparently had not, was left to an obvious inference.

"She was very kind," remarked Mrs Iver. "Not exactly actively, you know, but if you happened to come across her." She rose as she spoke and bade Miss S. farewell. That lady did not try to detain her, and the moment the door had closed behind her remarked:

"Of course Mrs Iver feels in a delicate position and can't say anything about Lady Tristram; but from what I hear she never realized the peculiarity of her position. No (this to Mrs Trumbler), I mean in the neighbourhood, Mrs Trumbler. And the young man is just the same. But I should have liked to hear that Mr Trumbler thought it came home to her at the last."

Mr Trumbler's wife shook her head gently.

"Well, now we shall see, I suppose," Miss S. pursued. "The engagement is to be made public directly after the funeral."

Mina almost started at this authoritative announcement.

"And I suppose they'll be married as soon as they decently can. I'm glad for Janie Iver's sake—not that I like him, the little I've seen of him."

"We never see him," said Mrs Trumbler.

"Not at church, anyhow," added Miss S. incisively. "Perhaps he'll remember what's due to his position now."

"Are you sure they're engaged?" asked Mina.

Miss S. looked at her with a smile. "Certain, my dear."

"How?" asked Mina. Mrs Trumbler stared at her in surprised rebuke.

"When I make a mistake, it will be time to ask questions," observed Miss S. with dignity. "For the present you may take what I say. I can wait to be proved right, Madame Zabriska."

"I've no doubt you're right; only I thought Janie would have told me," said Mina; she had no wish to quarrel with Miss S.

"Janie Iver's very secretive, my dear. She always was. I

used to talk to Mrs Iver about it when she was a little girl. And in your case——" Miss S.'s smile could only refer to the circumstance that Mina was Major Duplay's niece; the Major's manœuvres had not escaped Miss S.'s eye. "Of course the funeral will be very quiet," Miss S. continued. "That avoids so many difficulties. The people who would come and the people who wouldn't—and all that, you know."

"There are always so many questions about funerals," sighed Mrs Trumbler.

"I hate funerals," said Mina. "I'm going to be cremated."

"That may be very well abroad, my dear," said Miss S. tolerantly, "but you couldn't here. The question is, will Janie Iver go—and if she does, where will she walk?"

"Oh, I should hardly think she'd go, if it's not announced, you know," said Mrs Trumbler.

"It's sometimes done, and I'm told she would walk just behind the family."

Mina left the two ladies debating this point of etiquette, Miss S. showing some deference to Mrs Trumbler's experience in this particular department, but professing to be fortified in her own view by the opinion of an undertaker with a wide connexion. She reflected, as she got into her pony carriage, that it is impossible even to die without affording a good deal of pleasure to other people—surely a fortunate feature of the world!

On her way home she stopped to leave cards at Blent, and was not surprised when Harry Tristram came out of his study, having seen her through the window, and greeted her.

"Send your trap home and walk up the hill with me," he suggested, and she fell in with his wish very readily. They crossed the foot-bridge together.

"I've just been writing to ask my relations to the funeral," he said. "At my mother's wish, not mine. Only two of them—and I never saw them in my life."

"I shouldn't think you'd cultivate your relations much."

"No. But Cecily Gainsborough ought to come, I suppose. She's my heir."

Mina turned to him with a gesture of interest or surprise.

"Your heir?" she said. "You mean——?"

"I mean that if I died without having any children, she'd

succeed me. She'd be Lady Tristram in her own right, as my mother was." He faced round and looked at Blent. "She's never been to the place or seen it yet," he added.

"How intensely interested she'll be!"

"I don't see why she should," said Harry rather crossly. "It's a great bore having her here at all, and if I'm barely civil to her that's all I shall manage. They won't stay more than a few days, I suppose." After a second he went on: "Her mother wouldn't know my mother, though after her death the father wanted to be reconciled."

"Is that why you dislike them so?"

"How do you know I dislike them?" he asked, seeming surprised.

"It's pretty evident, isn't it? And it would be a good reason for disliking the mother anyhow."

"But not the daughter?"

"No, and you seem to dislike the daughter too—which isn't fair."

"Oh, I take the family in the lump. And I don't know that what we've been talking of has anything to do with it."

He did not seem inclined to talk more about the Gainsboroughs, though his frown told her that something distasteful was still in his thoughts. What he had said was enough to rouse in her a great interest and curiosity about this girl who was his heir. Questions and rights attracted her mind very little till they came to mean people; then she was keen on the track of the human side of the matter. The girl whom he chose to call his heir was really the owner of Blent!

"Are you going to ask us to the funeral?" she said.

"I'm not going to ask anybody. The churchyard is free; they can come if they like."

"I shall come. Shall you dislike my coming?"

"Oh, no." He was undisguisedly indifferent and almost bored.

"And then I shall see Cecily Gainsborough."

"Have a good look at her. You'll not have another chance—at Blent anyhow. She'll never come here again."

She looked at him in wonder, in a sort of fear.

"How hard you are sometimes," she said. "The poor girl's done nothing to you."

He shook his head impatiently and came to a stand on the road.

"You're going back? Good-bye, Lord Tristram."

"I'm not called that till after the funeral," he told her, looking as suspicious as he had in the earliest days of their acquaintance.

"And will you let me go on living at Merrion—or coming every summer anyhow?"

"Do you think of coming again?"

"I want to," she answered with some nervousness in her manner.

"And Major Duplay?" He smiled slightly.

"I don't know whether he would want to. Should you object?"

"Oh, no," said Harry, again with the weary indifference that seemed to have fastened on him now.

"I've been gossiping," she said, "with Mrs Trumbler and Miss Swinkerton."

"Good Lord!"

"Miss Swinkerton says your engagement to Janie will be announced directly after the funeral."

"And Major Duplay says that directly it's announced——!"

"You don't mean to tell me anything about it?"

"Really, I don't see why I should. Well, if you like—I want to marry her."

Mina had really known this well for a long while, yet she did not like to hear it. She had been spinning fancies about the man; what he had in his mind for himself was very prosaic. At least it seemed so to her—though she would have appreciated the dramatic side of it, had he told her of his idea of living with the big cheque by him.

"I can't help thinking that somehow you'll do something more exciting than that."

"She won't marry me?" He was not looking at her, and he spoke rather absently.

"I don't suppose she'll refuse you, but—no, I've just a feeling. I can't explain."

"A feeling? What feeling?" He was irritable, but his attention was caught again.

"That something more's waiting for you."

" That it's my business to go on affording you amusement perhaps ? "

Mina glanced at him ; he was smiling ; he had become good-tempered.

" Oh, I don't expect you to do it for that reason, but if you do it——"

" Do what ? " he asked, laughing outright.

" I don't know. But if you do, I shall be there to see—looking so hard at you, Mr Tristram." She paused, and then added, " I should like Cecily Gainsborough to come into it too."

" Confound Cecily Gainsborough ! Good-bye," said Harry.

He left with her two main impressions ; the first was that he had not the least love for the girl whom he meant to marry ; the second that he hardly cared to deny to her that he hated Cecily Gainsborough because she was the owner of Blent.

" All the same," she thought, " I suppose he'll marry Janie, and I'm certain he'll keep Blent." Yet he seemed to take no pleasure in his prospects and just at this moment not much in his possessions. Mina was puzzled, but did not go so far wrong as to conceive him conscience-stricken. She concluded that she must wait for light.

CHAPTER XI

A Phantom by the Pool

IN a quiet little street running between the Fulham and the King's Road, in a row of small houses not yet improved out of existence, there was one house smallest of all, with the smallest front, the smallest back, and the smallest garden. The whole thing was almost impossibly small, a peculiarity properly reflected in the rent which Mr Gainsborough paid to the firm of Sloyd, Sloyd & Gurney for the fag-end of a long lease. He did some professional work for Sloyds from time to time, and that member of the firm who had let Merrion Lodge to Mina Zabriska was on friendly terms with him ; so that perhaps the rent was a little lower still than it would have been otherwise ; even trifling reductions counted as important things in the Gainsborough budget. Being thus small, the house was naturally full ; the three people who lived there were themselves enough to account for that. But it was also unnaturally full by reason of Mr Gainsborough's habit of acquiring old furniture of no value, and new *bric-à-brac* whose worth could be expressed only by minus signs. These things flooded floors and walls, and overflowed on to the strip of gravel behind. From time to time many of them disappeared ; there were periodical revolts on Cecily's part, resulting in clearances ; the gaps were soon made good by a fresh influx of the absolutely undesirable. When Sloyd came he looked round with a professional despair that there was not a thing in the place which would fetch a sovereign ! Such is the end of seeking beauty on an empty purse ; some find a pathos in it, but it is more generally regarded as a folly in the seeker, a wrong to his dependants, and a nuisance to his friends.

In no other way could Gainsborough—Melton John Gainsborough, Architect—be called a nuisance, unless by Harry Tristram's capricious pleasure. For he was very unobtrusive, small like his house, lean like his purse, shabby as his furniture, humbler than his *bric-à-brac*. He asked very little of the world ; it gave him half, and he did not complain. He was

never proud of anything, but he was gratified by his honourable descent and by his alliance with the Tristrams. The family instinct was very strong in him. Among the rubbish he bought somebody else's pedigree was often to be found. His wife's hung framed on the wall (ending with " Adelaide Louisa Aimée " in large letters for one branch, and " Cecily " in small for the other) ; his own was the constant subject of unprofitable searchings in County Histories—one aspect of his remarkable genius for the unremunerative in all its respectable forms. He worked very hard and gave the impression of doing nothing—and the impression perhaps possessed the higher truth. Anyhow, while he and his had (thanks to a very small property which came with the late Mrs Gainsborough) always just enough to eat, they had always just not enough of anything else ; short commons were the rule.

And now they were going to Blent. Sloyd, calling on a matter of business and pleasantly excusing his intrusion by the payment of some fees, had heard about it from Gainsborough. " This'll just take us to Blent ! " the little gentleman had observed with satisfaction as he waved the slip of paper. Sloyd knew Blent and could take an interest ; he described it, raising his voice so that it travelled beyond the room and reached the hammock in the garden where Cecily lay. She liked a hammock, and her father could not stand china figures and vases on it, so that it secured her where to lay her head. Gainsborough was very fussy over the news ; a deeper but quieter excitement glowed in Cecily's eyes as, listening to Sloyd, she feigned to pay no heed. She had designs on the cheque. Beauty unadorned may mean several things ; but moralists cannot be right in twisting the commendation of it into a eulogium on thread-bare frocks. She must have a funeral frock.

Sloyd came to the door which opened on the garden, and greeted her. He was as smart as usual, his tie a new creation, his hat mirroring the sun. Cecily was shabby from necessity and somewhat touzled from lolling in the hammock. She looked up at him, smiling in a lazy amusement.

" Do you ever wear the same hat twice ? " she asked.

" Must have a good hat in my profession, Miss Gainsborough. You never know where you'll be sent for. The

Duchess of This, or Lady That, loses her money at cards—or the Earl drops a bit at Newmarket—must let the house for the season—sends off for me—mustn't catch me in an old hat!"

"Yes, I see."

"Besides, you may say what you like, but a gentleman ought to wear a good hat. It stamps him, Miss Gainsborough."

"Yours positively illuminates you. I could find the way by you on the darkest night."

"With just a leetle touch of oil——" he admitted cautiously, not quite sure how far she was serious in the admiration her eyes seemed to express. "What have you been doing with yourself?" he asked, breaking off after his sufficient confession.

"I've been drawing up advertisements of my own accomplishments." She sat up suddenly. "Oh, why didn't I ask you to help me? You'd have made me sound eligible and desirable, and handsome and spacious, and all the rest of it. And I found nothing at all to say!"

"What are you advertising for?"

"Somebody who knows less French than I do. But I shall wait till we come back now." She yawned a little. "I don't in the least want to earn my living, you know," she added candidly, "and there's no way I could honestly. I don't really know any French at all."

Sloyd regarded her with mingled pleasure and pain. His taste was for more robust beauty and more striking raiment, and she—no, she was not neat. Yet he decided that she would, as he put it, pay for dressing; she wanted some process analogous to the thorough repair which he loved to see applied to old houses. Then she would be attractive—not his sort, of course, but still attractive.

"I wonder if you'll meet Madame Zabriska, the lady I let Merrion Lodge to, and the gentleman with her, her uncle."

"I expect not. My cousin invites us for the funeral. It's on Saturday. I suppose we shall stay the Sunday, that's all. And I don't suppose we shall see anybody, to speak to, anyhow." Her air was very careless; the whole thing was represented as rather a bore.

"You should make a longer visit—I'm sure his lordship

will be delighted to have you, and it's a charming neighbourhood, a very desirable neighbourhood indeed."

" I dare say. But desirable things don't generally come our way, Mr Sloyd, or at any rate not much of them."

" It's pretty odd to think it'd all be yours if—if anything happened to Lord Tristram." His tone showed a mixture of amusement and awe. She was what he saw—she might become My Lady ! The incongruity reached his sense of humour, while her proximity to a noble status nearly made him take off his hat.

" It may be pretty odd," she said indolently, " but it doesn't do me much good, does it ? "

This last remark summed up the attitude which Cecily had always adopted about Blent, and she chose to maintain it now that she was at last to see Blent. Probably her father's family instinct had driven her into an insincere opposition ; or she did not consider it dignified to show interest in relatives who had shown none in her. She had never been asked to Blent. If she was asked now it was as a duty ; as a duty she would go. Harry did not monopolize the Tristram blood or the Tristram pride. But this attitude was not very comprehensible to her present companion. As a personal taste, Mr Sloyd would have liked to be connected, however remotely, with the aristocracy, and, if he had been, would have let his social circle hear a good deal about it ; even a business connexion was something, and suffered no loss of importance in his practised hands.

Yet in her heart she was on fire with an excitement which Sloyd would have wondered at, and which made her father's fussy nervousness seem absurd. At last she was to see with her eyes the things she had always heard of. She was to see Blent. Addie Tristram indeed she could no longer see ; that had always been denied to her, and the loss was irreparable. But even the dead Lady Tristram she would soon be able to realize far better than she had yet done ; she would put her into her surroundings. And Harry would be there, the cousin who had never been cousinly, the young man whom she did not know and who was a factor of such importance in her life. She had dreams in abundance about the expedition ; and it was in vain that reason said : " It'll be all over in three days.

Then back to the little house and the need for that advertisement ! " Luckily, this sort of suggestion, made by reason, never sounds probable, however well reason proves to us that it must come to pass. Cecily was sure that at last—ah, at last !—a change in life had come. Life had been always so very much the same ; changes generally need money, and money had not been hers. Knowledge usually needs money too, and of the kinds of life outside her own narrow sphere she was very ignorant. Beautiful things also need money ; of them she had seen and enjoyed very little ; only the parodies came to the small house in the small road. All these things joined to make her feel that a great moment was at hand ; she might and did deride herself, but the feeling was there, and at last she admitted it to her father when she said with a little laugh :

" I don't suppose anybody ever was so excited over a funeral before ! "

But perhaps there was ignorance in that remark too. It has been seen, for instance, that Miss Swinkerton and her friends could be very excited, although they had not the excuse of youth, of dreams, or of any kinship with the Tristrams.

" It's begun ! " Cecily said to herself when, three days afterward, they got out of their third-class carriage and got into the landau that waited for them. The footman, touching his hat, asked if Miss Gainsborough had brought a maid. (" The maid," not "A maid," was the form of reference familiar to Miss Gainsborough.) Her father was in new black, she was in new black, the two trunks had been well polished ; and the seats of the landau were very soft.

" They don't use the Fitzhubert crest, I observe," remarked Gainsborough. " Only the Tristram fox. Did you notice it on the harness ? "

" I was gazing with all my eyes at the coronet on the panel," she answered, laughing.

A tall and angular lady came up and spoke to the footman, as he was about to mount the box.

" At two on Saturday, miss," they heard him reply. Miss Swinkerton nodded, and walked slowly past the carriage, giving the occupants a leisurely stare. Of course Miss S. had known the time of the funeral quite well ; now her intimates would be

made equally well-acquainted with the appearance of the visitors.

Blent was in full beauty that summer evening, and the girl sat in entranced silence as they drove by the river and came where the old house stood. The blinds were down, the escutcheon, with the Tristram fox again, above the door in the central tower. They were ushered into the library. Gainsborough's eyes ran over the books with a longing envious glance ; his daughter turned to the window, to look at the Blent and up to Merrion. A funny remembrance of Sloyd crossed her mind, and she smiled. Had she already so caught the air of the place that Sloyd seemed to her both remote and very plebeian ? Turning her head, she saw the left wing with the row of windows that lighted the Long Gallery ; she had never seen such a room in a private house, and thought there must be several rooms in that wing. A man-servant brought in tea, and told them that Mr Tristram was engaged in pressing business and begged to be excused ; dinner would be at 8.15. Disappointed at her host's invisibility, she gave her father tea with a languid air. The little man was nervous and excited ; he walked the carpet carefully ; but soon he pounced on a book —a county history—and sat down with it. After a few minutes' idleness Cecily rose, strolled into the hall, and thence out into the garden. The hush of the house had become oppressive to her.

Yes, everything was very beautiful ; she felt that again, and drank it in, indulging her thirst so long unsatisfied. She had seen larger places, such palaces as all the folk of London are allowed to see. The present scene was new. And in the room above lay Addie Tristram in her coffin—the lovely strange woman of whom her mother had told her. She would not see Lady Tristram, but she seemed now to see all her life and to be able to picture her, to understand why she did the things they talked of, and what manner of woman she had been. She wandered to the little bridge. The stream below was the Blent ! Geographies might treat the rivulet with scanty notice and with poor respect ; to her it was Jordan—the sacred river. Might not its god have been ancestor to all the Tristrams ? In such a place as this one could have many such fancies ; they would come to feed the mind and make it grow, to transform

it into something that could appreciate poetry. A big rose-tree climbed the wall of the right wing. Who had picked its blossoms and through how many years? Its flowers must often have adorned Addie Tristram's unsurpassed loveliness. After the years of short commons there came this bountiful feast to her soul. She felt herself a Tristram. A turn of chance might have made all this her own. Her breath seemed to stop as she thought of this. The idea now was far different from what it had sounded when Sloyd gave it utterance in the tiny strip of garden behind the tiny house, and she had greeted it with scorn and a mocking smile. She did not want all this for her own; but she did want—how she wanted!—to be allowed to stop and look at it, to stay long enough to make it part of her and have it to carry back with her to her home between the King's Road and the Fulham Road in London.

She crossed the bridge and walked up the valley. Twenty minutes brought her to the Pool. It opened on her with a new surprise. The sun had just left it and its darkness was touched by mystery. The steep wooded bank opposite cast a dull heavy shadow across half the surface; the low lapping of the water sounded like somebody whispering old secrets that she seemed half to hear, garrulous histories of the dead—the dead whose blood was in her veins—old glories, old scandals, old trifles, all mixed together, all of great importance in the valley of the Blent. Who cares about such things in London, about anybody's family, or anybody himself? There is no time for such things in London. It is very different in the valley of the Blent when the sun is low and the cry of a bird makes a sound too shrill to be welcome.

Turning by chance to look up the road toward Mingham, she saw a man coming down the hill. He was sauntering idly along, beating the grass by the roadside with his stick. Suddenly he stopped short, put his hand above his eyes, and gave her a long look; he seemed to start. Then he began to walk toward her with a rapid eager stride. She turned away and strolled along by the Pool on her way back to Blent Hall. But he would not be denied; his tread came nearer; he overtook her and halted almost by her side, raising his hat and gazing with uncompromising straightness in her face. She

knew him at once ; he must be Harry Tristram. Was lounging about the roads his pressing business ?

" I beg your pardon," he said with a curious appearance of agitation. " I am Harry Tristram, and you must be——? "

" Cecily Gainsborough," said she with a distant manner, inclined to be offended that their meeting should be by accident. Why had he not received his guests if he had nothing to do but lounge about the roads ?

" Yes, I was sure. The moment I thought, I was sure." He took no heed of her manner, engrossed in some preoccupation of his own. " At first I was startled." He smiled now, as he offered her his hand. Then he recollected. " You must forgive me for being out. I have been hard at work all day, and the craving for the evening was on me. I went out without thinking."

" They said you were engaged on pressing business."

" They lied for me. I forgot to leave any message. I'm not generally discourteous."

His apology disarmed her and made her resentment seem petty.

" How could you think of us at such a time ? It's good of you to have us at all."

" My mother wanted you to come." He added no welcome of his own. " You never saw her, did you ? " he asked a moment later.

Cecily shook her head. She was rather confused by the steady gaze of his eyes. Did Cousin Harry always stare at people as hard as that ? Yet it was not exactly a stare ; it was too thoughtful, too ruminative, too unconscious for that.

" Let's walk back together. You've had a look at the place already perhaps ? "

" It's very beautiful."

" Yes," he assented absently, as they began to walk.

If she did not stare, still she used her eyes, curiously studying his face with its suggestion of strength and that somehow rather inconsistent hint of sensitiveness. He was gloomy ; that was just now only proper. She saw something that puzzled her ; Mina Zabriska could have told her what it was, but she herself did not succeed in identifying Harry's watching

look. She was merely puzzled at a certain shade of expression in the eyes. She had not seen it at the first moment, but it was there now as he turned to her from time to time while they sauntered along.

"That's Merrion, our dower-house. But it's let now to a funny little woman, Madame Zabriska. She's rather a friend of mine, but her uncle, who lives with her, doesn't like me." He smiled as he spoke of the Major. "She's very much interested in you."

"In me? Has she heard of me?"

"She hears of most things. She's as sharp as a needle. I like her though."

He said no more till they were back in the garden; then he proposed that they should sit down on the seat by the river.

"My mother used to sit here often," he said. "She always loved to see the sun go down from the garden. She didn't read or do anything; she just sat watching."

"Thinking?" Cecily suggested.

"Well, hardly. Letting thoughts happen if they wanted to, perhaps. She was always rather—rather passive about things, you know. They took hold of her if—well, as I say, if they wanted to." He turned to her quickly as he asked, "Are you at all like that?"

"I believe I'm only just beginning to find out that I'm anything or like anything. And, anyhow, I'm quite different from what I was yesterday."

"From yesterday?"

"Yes. Just by coming here, I think."

"That's what I mean! Things do take hold of you then?"

"This place does apparently," she answered laughing, as she lent back on the seat, throwing her arm behind her and resting her head on it. She caught him looking at her again with marked and almost startled intensity. He was rather strange with his alternations of apparent forgetfulness and this embarrassing scrutiny.

"Tell me about yourself," he asked, or rather commanded, so brusque and direct was the request.

She told him about the small house and the small life she had

led in it, even about the furniture and the *bric-à-brac*, confessing to her occasional clearances and the deception she had to practise on her father about them. He was very silent, but he was a good listener. Soon he began to smoke, and did not ask leave. This might be rudeness, but seemed a rather cousinly sort of rudeness, and was readily forgiven.

"And suddenly I come to all this!" she murmured. Then with a start she added, "But I'm forgetting your mother's death and what you must feel, and chattering about myself!"

"I asked you to talk about yourself. Is it such a great change to come here?"

"Immense! To come here even for a day! Immense!" She waved her hand a moment and found him following it with his eyes as it moved.

"You don't look," he said slowly, "as if it was any change at all."

"What do you mean?" she asked, interested in what he seemed to suggest.

"You fit in," he murmured, looking up at the house—at the window of Addie Tristram's room. "And you're very poor?" he asked.

"Yes. And you——!"

"Oh, I'm not rich as such things go. The estate has fallen in value very much, you know. But——" He broke off, frowning a little. "Still we're comfortable enough," he resumed.

"I should think so. You'd always have it to look at anyhow. What did you think I should be like?"

"Anything in the world but what you are."

The tone was at once too sincere and too absent for a compliment. Cecily knew herself not to be plain; but he was referring to something else than that.

"In fact I hardly thought of you as an individual at all. You were the Gainsboroughs."

"And you didn't like the Gainsboroughs?" she cried in a flash of intuition.

"No, I didn't," he admitted.

"Why not?"

"A prejudice," answered Harry Tristram after a pause.

She crossed her legs, sticking one foot out in front of her and looking at it thoughtfully. He followed the movement and slowly broke into a smile ; it was followed by an impatient shrug. With the feminine instinct she pushed her gown lower down, half over the foot. Harry laughed. She looked up, blushing and inclined to be angry.

" Oh, it wasn't that," he said, laughing again rather contemptuously. " But——" He rose, took some paces along the lawn, and then, coming back, stood beside her, staring at the Blent and frowning rather formidably.

" Did you see me when I first saw you by the Pool ? " he asked in a moment.

" Yes. How you hurried after me ! "

Another pause followed, Harry's frown giving way to a smile, but a perplexed and reluctant one. Cecily watched him with puzzled interest—still sitting with her foot stuck out in front of her and her head resting on the bend of her arm ; her eyes looked upward, and her lips were just parted.

" Have I been staring at you ? " he inquired abruptly.

" Well, yes, you have," she answered, laughing. " But a strange cousin expects to be examined rather carefully. Do I pass muster among the Tristrams ? Or am I all the hated Gainsborough ? "

He looked at her again and earnestly. She met the look without lowering her eyes or altering her position in any particular.

" It's too absurd ! " he declared, half fretful, half amused. " Your features aren't so very much alike—except the eyes, they are—and your hair's darker. But you move and carry yourself and turn your head as she did. And that position you're in now—why I've seen her in it a thousand times ! Your arm there and your foot stuck out——"

His voice grew louder as he went on, his petulant amusement giving way to an agitation imperfectly suppressed.

" Who do you mean ? " she asked, catching excitement from him.

" Why, my mother. That's her attitude, and your walk's her walk, and your voice her voice. You're her—all over ! Why, when I saw you by the Pool just now, a hundred yards off, strolling on the bank——"

" Yes ? " she half-whispered, " You started, didn't you ? "

" Yes, I started. I thought for a moment I saw my mother's ghost. I thought my mother had come back to Blent. And it is—you ! "

He threw out his hands in a gesture of what seemed despair.

CHAPTER XII

Fighters and Doubters

"MISS S. wasn't so far wrong after all!" exclaimed Mina Zabriska, flinging down a letter on the table by her.

It was three days after Addie Tristram's funeral. Mina had attended that ceremony, or rather watched it from a little way off. She had seen Gainsborough's spare humble figure, she had seen too, with an acute interest, the tall slim girl all in black, heavily veiled, who walked beside him, just behind the new Lord Tristram. She had also, of course, seen all the neighbours who were looking on like herself, but who gave their best attention to Janie Iver and disappointed Miss S. by asking hardly any questions about the Gainsboroughs. Little, indeed, would have been said concerning them except for the fact that Gainsborough (true to his knack of the unlucky) caught a chill on the occasion and was confined to his bed down at Blent. A most vexatious occurrence for Lord Tristram, said Miss S. But one that he ought to bear patiently, added Mrs Trumbler. And after all, both ladies agreed, it would have been hardly decent to turn the Gainsboroughs out on Monday, as it was well known the new Lord had proposed.

But the Gainsboroughs were not in Mina's thoughts just now.

"Nothing is to be made public yet—please remember this. But I want you to know that I have just written to Harry Tristram to say I will marry him. I have had a great deal of trouble, dear Mina, but I think I have done right, looking at it all round. Except my own people I am telling only one friend besides you ["Bob Broadley!" said Mina with a nod, as she read the letter the second time]. But I want you to know; and please tell your uncle too. I hope you will both give me your good wishes. I do think I'm acting wisely; and I thought I had no right to keep him waiting and worrying about this when he has so much to think of

besides. You must stay at Merrion after I come to Blent.—JANIE."

Barring the matter of the immediate announcement then, Miss S. was justified. Janie had done the obviously right thing—and was obviously not quite sure that it was right. That mattered very little ; it was done. It was for Mina Zabriska—and others concerned—to adapt themselves and conform their actions to the accomplished fact. But would Major Duplay take that view ? To Mina was entrusted the delicate task of breaking the news to her uncle. It is the virtue of a soldier not to know when he is beaten ; of a general not to let others know. To what standard of martial conduct would the Major adhere ? This matter of the Major was in every way a nuisance to his niece. In the first place she wanted to think about herself and her own feelings—the one luxury of the unhappy. Secondly, she was afraid again. For Harry suddenly seemed to be no protection now, and the horrors threatened by Duplay—the interrogation, the lawyer's office, and the like—recovered their dreadfulness. It had been easy —perhaps pleasant—to suffer for the confidential friend who had opened his heart to her on the hillside. It became less easy and certainly more unpleasant to be sacrificed for Janie Iver's *fiancé*. But Mina, though no longer exultant and no more fearless, would be loyal and constant all the same. Should she, after saving others, be herself a castaway ? She experienced a longing for the sympathy and support of Mr Jenkinson Neeld. Surely he would stand firm too ? He was still at Fairholme. Was he included in Janie's " own people ? " Had he been told the news ?

The delicate task ! The Imp's temper was far too bad for delicacy ; she found a positive pleasure in outraging it. She took her letter, marched into the smoking-room, and threw it to (not to say at) her uncle.

" Read that ! " she said and strode off to the window to have a look at Blent. The letter had succeeded, it seemed, in taking away from her life all she wanted, and introducing into it all she did not.

" This is very serious," declared the Major solemnly, " very serious indeed, Mina."

" Don't see how," snapped the Imp, presenting an un-

wavering backview to her uncle. " If they like to get married, why is it serious ? "

" Pray be reasonable," he urged. " You must perceive that the situation I have always contemplated——"

" Well, you can go on contemplating it, can't you, uncle ? It won't do much good, but still——"

" The situation, I say, has arisen." She heard him get up, walk to the hearthrug, and strike a match. Of course he was going to have a cigarette ! He would smoke it all through with exasperating slowness and then arrive at an odious conclusion. Mina had not been married for nothing ; she knew men's ways. He justified her forecast ; it was minutes before he spoke again.

" The terms of this letter," he resumed at last, " fortify me in my purpose. It is evident that Miss Iver is influenced—largely influenced—by—er—the supposed position of—er—Mr Tristram."

" Of who ? "

" Of the present possessor of Blent."

" If you want people to know who you mean, you'd better say Lord Tristram."

" For the present, if you wish it. I say, she is——" Duplay's pompous formality suddenly broke down. " She's taking him for his title, that's all."

" Oh, if you choose to say things like that about your friends ! "

" You know it's true. What becomes my duty then ? "

" I don't know and I don't care. Only I hate people who talk about duty when they're going to——" Well, one must stop somewhere in describing one's relatives' conduct. The Imp stopped there. But the sentence really lost nothing ; Duplay could guess pretty accurately what she had been going to say.

Fortunately, although he was very dependent on her help, he cared little about her opinion. She neither would nor could judge his position fairly ; she would not perceive how he felt, how righteous was his anger, how his friends were being cheated and he was being jockeyed out of his chances by one and the same unscrupulous bit of imposture. He had brought himself round to a more settled state of mind

and had got his conscience into better order. If he were acting unselfishly, he deserved commendation. But even if self-interest guided him he was free of blame. No man is bound to let himself be swindled. He doubted seriously of nothing now except his power to upset Harry Tristram's plans. He was resolved to try ; Mina must speak—and if money were needed, it must come from somewhere. The mere assertion of what he meant to allege must at least delay this hateful marriage. It must be added—though the Major was careful not to add—that it would also give Harry Tristram a very unpleasant shock ; the wrestling bout by the Pool and the loss of that shilling were not forgotten. It may further be observed—though the Major could not be expected to observe—that he had such an estimate of his own attractions as led him to seize very eagerly on any evidences of liking for Harry's position, rather than of preference for Harry himself, which Janie's letter might be considered to afford. The Major, in fact, had a case ; good argument made it seem a good case. It is something to have a case that can be argued at all ; morality has a sad habit of leaving us without a leg to stand on. In the afternoon of that day Duplay went down to Fairholme. Miss Swinkerton passed him on the road and smiled sagaciously. Oh, if Miss S. had known the truth about his errand ! A gossip in ignorance has pathos as a spectacle.

Mr Neeld was still at Fairholme ; he had been pressed to stay and needed little pressing ; in fact, in default of the pressure he would probably have taken lodgings in the town. He could not go away ; he had seen Addie Tristram buried, and her son walking behind the coffin, clad in his new dignity. His mind was full of the situation. Yet he had shrunk from discussing it further with Mina Zabriska. The family anxiety about Janie's love affair had been all round him. Now he suspected strongly that some issue was being decided upon. He ought to speak, to break his word to Mina and speak—or he ought to go. From day to day he meant to go and cease to accept the hospitality which his silence seemed to abuse. But he did not go. These internal struggles were new in his placid and estimable life ; this affair of Harry Tristram's had a way of putting people in strange and difficult positions.

"Mind you say nothing—nothing—nothing." That

sentence had reached him on the reverse side of an invitation to take tea at Merrion—a vague some-day-when-you're-passing sort of invitation, in Neeld's eyes plainly and merely a pretext for writing and an opportunity of conveying the urgent little scrawl on the other side. It arrived at midday ; in the afternoon Duplay had come and was now alone with Iver.

The outward calm of the grey-haired old gentleman who sat on the lawn at Fairholme, holding a weekly review upside down, was no index to the alarming and disturbing questions which were agitating him within. At the end of a blameless life it is hard to discover that you must do one of two things and that, whichever you do, you will feel like a villain. The news that Josiah Cholderton's Journal was going off very fairly well with the trade had been unable to give its editor any consolation ; he did not care about the Journal now.

Iver came out and sat down beside him without speaking. Neeld hastily restored his paper to a position more befitting its dignity and became apparently absorbed in an article on " Shyness in Elephants " ; the subject was treated with a wealth of illustration and in a vein of introspective philosophy exceedingly instructive. But it was all wasted on Mr Neeld. He was waiting for Iver ; no man could be so silent unless he had something important to say or to leave unsaid. And Iver was not even smoking the cigar which he always smoked after tea. Neeld could bear it no longer ; he got up and was about to move away.

" Stop, Neeld. Do you mind sitting down again for a moment ? "

Neeld could do nothing but comply. The review fell on the ground by him and he ceased to struggle with the elephants.

" I want to ask your opinion——"

" My dear Iver, my opinion ! Oh, I'm not a business man, and——"

" It's not business. You know Major Duplay ? What do you think of him ? "

" I—I've always found him very agreeable."

" Yes, so have I. And I've always thought him honest, haven't you ? "

Neeld admitted that he had no reason to impugn the Major's character.

" And I suppose he's sane," Iver pursued. " But he's just been telling me the most extraordinary thing." He paused a moment. " I dare say you've noticed something between Janie and young Tristram ? I may as well tell you that she has just consented to marry him. But I don't want to talk about that except so far as it comes into the other matter—which it does very considerably." He laid his hand on Neeld's knee. " Neeld, Duplay came and told me that Harry Tristram has no title to the peerage or to Blent. I'm not going to trouble you with the details now. It comes to this—Harry was born before, not after, the marriage of his parents. Duplay says Mina knows all about it, and will give us information that will make the proof easy. That's a tolerably startling story, eh ? One's prepared for something where Lady Tristram was involved, but this——! "

It was fortunate that he did not glance at Neeld ; Neeld had tried to appear startled, but had succeeded only in looking supremely miserable. But Iver's eyes were gazing straight in front of him under brows that frowned heavily.

" Now what I want you to do," he resumed, " and I'm sure you won't refuse me, is this. I'm inclined to dismiss the whole thing as a blunder. I believe Duplay's honest, but I think certain facts in his own position have led him to be too ready to believe a mere yarn. But I've consented to see Mina and hear what she has to say. And I said I should bring you as a witness. I go to Merrion Lodge to-morrow for this purpose, and I shall rely on you to accompany me." With that the cigar made its appearance ; Iver lit it and lay back in his chair, frowning still in perplexity and vexation. He had not asked his friend's opinion but his services. It was characteristic of him not to notice this fact. And the fact did nothing to relieve Neeld's piteous embarrassment.

" I knew it all along " ; he might say that. " I know nothing about it " ; he might act that. Or he might temporize for a little while. This was what he did.

" It would make a great difference if this were true ? " His voice shook, but Iver was absorbed.

" An enormous difference," said Iver (Lady Tristram herself had once said the same). " I marry my daughter to Lord Tristram of Blent or to—to whom ? You'll call that

snobbishness, or some people would. I say it's not snobbish in us new men to consider that. It's the right thing for us to do, Neeld. Other things equal—if the man's a decent fellow and the girl likes him—I say it's the right thing for us to do. That's the way it always has happened, and the right way too."

Mr Neeld nodded. He had sympathy with these opinions.

" But if it's true, why, who's Harry Tristram ? Oh, I know it's all a fluke, a damned fluke, if you like, Neeld, and uncommonly hard on the boy. But the law's the law, and for my own part I'm not in favour of altering it. Now do you suppose I want my daughter to marry him, if it's true ? "

" I suppose you wouldn't," murmured Neeld.

" And there's another thing. Duplay says Harry knows it —Duplay swears he knows it. Well then, what's he doing ? In my opinion he's practising a fraud. He knows he isn't what he pretends to be. He deceives me, he deceives Janie. If the thing ever comes out, where is she ? He's treated us very badly if it's true."

The man, ordinarily so calm and quiet in his reserved strength, broke out into vehemence as he talked of what Harry Tristram had done if the Major's tale were true. Neeld asked himself what his host would say of a friend who knew the story to be true and yet said nothing of it. He perceived, too, that although Iver would not have forced his daughter's inclination, yet the marriage was very good in his eyes, the proper end and the finest crown to his own career. This had never come home to Neeld with any special force before. Iver was English of the English in his repression, in his habit of meeting both good and bad luck with—well, with something like a grunt. But he was stirred now ; the suddenness of the thing had done it. And in face of his feelings how stood Mr Neeld ? He saw nothing admirable in how and where he stood.

" Well, we'll see Mina and hear if she's got anything to say. Fancy that little monkey being drawn into a thing like this ! Meanwhile we'll say nothing. I don't believe it, and I shall want a lot of convincing. Until I am convinced, everything stands as it did. I rely on you for that, Neeld—and I rely on you to come to Merrion to-morrow. Not a word to my wife—above all not a word to Janie ! " He got up, took possession of

Neeld's review, and walked off into the house with his business-like quick stride.

Neeld sat there, slowly rubbing his hands against one another between his knees. He was realizing what he had done, or rather what had happened to him. When his life, his years, and what he conceived to be his character were considered, it was a very surprising thing, this silence of his—the conspiracy he had entered into with Mina Zabriska, the view of duty which the Imp, or Harry, or the thought of beautiful Addie Tristram, or all of them together, had made him take. So strange a view for him! To run counter to law, to outrage good sense, to slight the claims of friendship, to suppress the truth, to aid what Iver so relentlessly called a fraud—all these were strange doings for him to be engaged in. And why had he done it? The explanation was as strange as the things that he invoked it to explain. Still rubbing his hands, palm against palm, to and fro, he said very slowly, with wonder and reluctance:

"I was carried away. I was carried away by—by romance."

The word made him feel a fool. Yet what other word was there for the overwhelming unreasoning feeling that at the cost of everything the Tristrams, mother and son, must keep Blent, the son living and the mother dead, that the son must dwell there and the spirit of the mother be about him she loved in the spot that she had graced? It was very rank romance indeed—no other word for it! And—wildest paradox!—it all came out of editing Josiah Cholderton's Journal.

Before he had made any progress in unravelling his skein of perplexities he saw Janie coming across the lawn. She took the chair her father had left and seemed to take her father's mood with it; the same oppressive silence settled on her. Neeld broke it this time.

"You don't look very merry, Miss Janie," he said, smiling at her and achieving a plausible jocularity.

"Why should I, Mr Neeld?" She glanced at him. "Oh, has father told you anything?"

"Yes, that you're engaged. You know how truly I desire your happiness, my dear." With a pretty courtesy the old man took her hand and kissed it, baring his grey hair the while.

"You're very very kind. Yes, I've promised to marry Harry

Tristram. Not yet, you know. And it isn't to be announced. But I've promised."

He stole a glance at her, and then another. She did not look merry indeed. Neeld knew his ignorance of feminine things, and made guesses with proper diffidence; but he certainly fancied she had been crying—or very near it—not so long ago. Yet the daughter of William Iver was sensible and not given to silly tears.

"I think I've done right," she said—as she had said when she wrote to Mina. "Everybody will be pleased. Father's very pleased." Suddenly she put out her hand and took hold of his, giving it a tight grip. "Oh, but, Mr Neeld, I've made somebody so unhappy."

"I dare say, my dear, I dare say. I was a young fellow once. I dare say."

"And he says nothing about it. He wished me joy—and he does wish me joy too. I've no right to talk to you, to tell you, or anything. I don't believe people think girls ever mind making men unhappy; but they do."

"If they like the men?" This suggestion, at least, was not too difficult for him.

"Yes, when they like them, when they're old friends, you know. I only spoke to him for a moment, I only just met him on the road. I don't suppose I shall ever talk to him about it, or about anything in particular, again." She squeezed Neeld's hand a second time, and then withdrew her own.

This was unknown country again for Mr Neeld; his sense of being lost grew more acute. These were not the sort of problems which had occupied his life; but they seemed now to him no less real, hardly less important. It was only a girl wondering if she had done right. Yet he felt the importance of it.

"You can't help the unhappiness," he said. "You must go to the man you love, my dear."

With a little start she turned and looked at him for an instant. Then she murmured in a perfunctory fashion:

"Yes, I must make the best choice I can, of course." She added after a pause, "But I wish——"

Words or the inclination to speak failed her again, and she relapsed into silence.

As he sat there beside her, silent too, his mind travelled back to what her father had said ; and slowly he began to understand. No doubt she liked Harry, even as her father did. No doubt she thought he would be a good husband, as Iver had thought him a good fellow. But it became plain to the searcher after truth that not to her any more than to her father was it nothing that Harry was Tristram of Blent. Her phrases about doing right and making the right choice included a reference to that, even if that were not their whole meaning. She had mentioned her father's pleasure—everybody's pleasure. That pleasure would be found largely in seeing her Lady Tristram. What then would she have to say on the question that so perplexed Mr Neeld ? Would she not echo Iver's accusation of fraud against Harry Tristram and (as a consequence) against those who aided and abetted him ? Would she understand or accept as an excuse the plea that Neeld had been led away by romance or entrapped into a conspiracy by Mina Zabriska ? No. She too would call out " Fraud, fraud ! " and he did not blame her. He called himself a fool for having been led away by romance, by unreasoning feeling. Should he blame her because she was not led away ? His disposition was to praise her for a choice so wise, and to think that she had done very right in accepting Lord Tristram of Blent. Aye, Lord Tristram of Blent ! Precisely ! Deep despair settled on Mr Neeld's baffled mind.

Meanwhile Duplay walked home, the happier for having crossed his Rubicon. He had opened his campaign with all the success he could have expected. Like a wise man, Iver held nothing true till it was proved ; but like a wise man also he dubbed nothing a lie merely because it was new or improbable. And on the whole he had done the Major justice. He had smiled for a moment when he hinted that Duplay and Harry were not very cordial ; the Major met him by a straightforward recognition that this was true, and by an indirect admission of the reason. As to this latter Iver had dropped no word ; but he would give Duplay a hearing. Now it remained only to bring Mina to reason. If she spoke, the case would be so strong as to demand inquiry. The relief in Duplay's mind was so great that he could not explain it, until he realized that his niece's way of treating him had so stuck

in his memory that he had been prepared to be turned from Iver's doors with contumely. Such an idea seemed absurd now, and the Major laughed.

Mina was strange, Duplay never ceased to think that. They had parted on impossible terms; but now, as soon as he appeared, she ran at him with apparent pleasure and with the utmost eagerness. She asked nothing about his expedition either, though she could easily have guessed where he had been and for what purpose. She almost danced as she cried:

"I've seen her! I've been talking to her! I met her in the meadow near Matson's cottage, and she asked me the way back to Blent. Uncle, she's wonderful!"

"Who are you talking about?"

"Why, Cecily Gainsborough, of course. I just remember how Lady Tristram spoke. She speaks the same way exactly! I can't describe it, but it's the sort of voice that makes you want to do anything in the world it asks. Don't you know? She told me a lot about herself; then she talked about Blent. She's full of it; she admires it most tremendously——"

"That's all right," interrupted Duplay with a malicious smile. "Because, so far as I can understand, she happens to own it."

"What?" The Imp stood frozen into stillness.

"You've been talking to Lady Tristram of Blent," he added with a nod. "Though I suppose you didn't tell her so?"

To Lady Tristram of Blent! She had never once thought of that while they talked. The shock of the idea was great, so great that Mina forgot to repudiate it, or to show any indignation at Harry's claims being passed by in contemptuous silence. All the while they talked, she had thought of the girl as far removed from Blent, as even more of a visitor to the countryside than she herself was, a wonderful visitor indeed, but no part of their life. And she was—well, at the least she was heir to Blent! How had she forgotten that? The persistent triumph of Duplay's smile marked his sense of the success of his sally.

"Yes, and she'll be installed there before many months are out," he went on. "So I hope you made yourself pleasant, Mina?"

Mina gave him one scornful glance, as she passed by him

and ran out on to her favourite terrace. There was a new thing to look and to wonder at in Blent. The interest, the sense of concern in Blent and its affairs, which the news of the engagement had blunted and almost destroyed, revived in her now. She forgot the prose of the marriage arrangement, and turned eagerly to the poetry of Cecily Gainsborough, of the poor girl there in the house that was hers, unwitting guest of the man who was—— The Imp stopped herself with rude abruptness. What had she been about to say, what had she been about to think ? The guest of the man who was robbing her ? That had been it. But no, no, no ! She did not think that. Confused in her mind by this new idea, none the less she found her sympathy going out to Harry again. He was not a robber ; it was his own. The blood, she cried still, and not the law ! But what was to be done about Cecily Gainsborough ? Was she to go back to the little house in London, was she to go back to ugliness, to work, to short commons ? There seemed no way out. Between the old and the new attraction, the old allegiance and the new claim to homage that Cecily made, Mina Zabriska stood bewildered. She had a taste now of the same perplexity that she had done so much to bring on poor Mr Neeld at Fairholme. Yet not quite the same. He did not know what he ought to do ; she did not feel sure of what she wanted. Both stood undecided. Mr Cholderton's Journal was still at its work of disturbing people's minds.

But Major Duplay was well content with the day's work. If his niece had a divided mind she would be easier to bend to his will. He did not care who had Blent, if only it passed from Harry. But it was a point gained if Mina could think of its passing from Harry to somebody who would be welcome to her there. Then she would tell the story which she had received from her mother, and the first battle against Harry Tristram would be won. The excitement of fighting was on the Major now. He would neither pity the enemy nor distrust his own cause till the strife was done.

Amongst all the indecision there was about, Duplay had the merit of a clear vision of his own purpose and his own desires.

CHAPTER XIII

In the Long Gallery

THE man with whom the fighters and the doubters were concerned, in whose defence or attack efforts and hopes were enlisted, round whom hesitation and struggles gathered, was thinking very little about his champions or his enemies. No fresh whispers of danger had come to Harry Tristram's ears. He knew nothing of Neeld and could not think of that quiet old gentleman as a possible menace to his secret. He trusted Mina Zabriska and relied on the influence which he had proved himself to possess over her. He did not believe that Duplay would stick to his game, and was not afraid of him if he did. The engagement was accomplished ; the big cheque, or the prospect of it, lay ready to his hand ; his formal proofs, perfect so long as they were unassailed, awaited the hour when the formal proofs would be required. To all appearance he was secure in his inheritance and buttressed against any peril. No voice was raised, no murmur was heard, to impugn the right of the new Lord Tristram of Blent. The object of all those long preparations, which had occupied his mother and himself for so many years, was achieved. He sat in Addie Tristram's place, and none said him nay.

His mind was not much on these matters at all. Even his engagement occupied him very little. Janie's letter had arrived and had been read. It came at midday, and the evening found it still unacknowledged. It had broken in from outside as it were, intruding like something foreign into the life that he had begun to live on the evening before Addie Tristram was buried, the evening when for an instant he had thought he saw her phantom by the Pool ; a life foreshadowed by the new mood which Mina had noticed in him while Lady Tristram still lived, but brought into reality by the presence of another. It seemed a new life coming to one who was almost a new man, so much of the unexpected in him did it reveal to himself. He had struggled against it, saying that the Monday morning would see an end of this unlooked-for

episode of feeling and of companionship. Accident stepped in ; Gainsborough lay in bed with a chill and could not move. Harry acquiesced in the necessity of his remaining, not exactly with pleasure, rather with a sense that something had begun to happen, not by his will, but affecting him deeply. What would come of it he did not know ; that it would end in a day or two, that it would be only an episode and leave no permanent mark seemed now almost impossible ; it was fraught with something bigger than that.

But with what ? He had no reasoned idea ; he was unable to reason. He was passive in the hands of the feelings, the impressions, the fancies that laid hold of him. Addie Tristram's death had moved him strangely ; then came that hardly natural, eerily fascinating reminiscence—— No, it was more than that—that re-embodiment or resurrection of her in the girl who moved and talked and sat like her, who had her ways though not her face, her eyes set in another frame, her voice renewed in youthful richness, the very turns of her head, even her old trick of sticking out her foot. He scowled sometimes, he was surprised into laughter sometimes ; at another moment he would rebel against the malicious power that seemed to be having a joke with him ; for the most part he looked, and looked, and looked, unwilling to miss a single one of the characteristic touches which had been Addie Tristram's belongings and which he had never expected to see again after her spirit had passed away. And the outcome of all his looking was still the same as the effect of his first impression on the evening before the funeral—a sort of despair. A thing was there which he did not know how to deal with.

And she was so happy, so absurdly happy. She had soon found that he expected no conventional solemnity ; he laughed himself at the idea of Addie Tristram wanting people to pull long faces, and keep them long when pulled, because she had laid her burden down and was at peace. Cecily found she might be merry, and merry she was. A new life had come to her too, a life of river and trees and meadows ; deeper than that, a life of beauty about her. She absorbed it with a native thirst. There was plenty of it, and she had been starved so long. She seized on Blent and enjoyed it to the full. She enjoyed Harry too, laughing now when he stared at her, and

making him laugh, yet herself noting all his ways, his pride, his little lordlinesses—these grew dear to her—his air of owning the countryside, and making no secret of her own pleasure in being part of the family and in living in the house that owned the countryside. It is to be feared that Mr Gainsborough and his chill were rather neglected, but he got on very well with Addie Tristram's ancient maid ; she had the nobility at her fingers' ends and even knew something about their pedigrees. Cecily was free, or assumed the freedom, to spend her time with Harry, or, if he failed her, at least with and among the things that belonged to him and had belonged to beautiful Addie Tristram who had been like her—so Harry said, and Cecily treasured the thought, teasing him now sometimes, as they grew intimate, with a purposed repetition of a pose or trick that she had first displayed unconsciously, and found had power to make him frown or smile. She smiled herself in mischievous triumph when she hit her mark, or she would break into the rich gurgle of delight that he remembered hearing from his young mother when he himself was a child. The life was to her all pure delight ; she had no share in the thoughts that often darkened his brow, no knowledge of the thing which again and again filled him with that wondering despair.

On the evening of the day when Major Duplay went to Fairholme, the two sat together in the garden after dinner. It was nine o'clock, a close still night, with dark clouds now and then slowly moving off and on to the face of a moon nearly full. They had been silent for some minutes, sipping coffee. Cecily pointed to the row of windows in the left wing of the house.

" I've never been there," she said. " What's that ? "

" The Long Gallery—all one long room, you know," he answered.

" One room ! All that ! What's in it ? "

" Well, everything mostly," he smiled. " All our treasures, and our pictures, and so on."

" Why haven't you taken me there ? "

Harry shrugged his shoulders. " You never asked me," he said.

" Well, will you take me there now—when you've finished your cigar ? "

There was a pause before he answered : " Yes, if you like." He turned to the servant who had come to take away the coffee. " Light up the Long Gallery at once."

" Yes, my lord." A slight surprise broke through the respectful acceptance of the order.

" It was lighted last for my mother, months ago," Harry said, as though he were explaining his servant's surprise. " She sat there the last evening before she took to her room."

" Is that why you haven't taken me there ? "

" I expect it is." His tone was not very confident.

" And you don't much want to now ? "

" No, I don't know that I do." But his reluctance seemed vague and weak.

" Oh, I must go," Cecily decided, " but you needn't come unless you like, you know."

" All right, you go alone," he agreed.

Window after window sprang into light. " Ah ! " murmured Cecily in satisfaction ; and Mina Zabriska saw the illumination from the terrace of Merrion on the hill. Cecily rose, waved her hand to Harry, and ran off into the house with a laugh. The next moment he saw her figure in the first window ; she threw it open, waved her hand again, and again laughed ; the moon, clear for a moment, shone on her face and turned it pale.

He sat watching the lighted windows. From time to time she darted into sight ; once he heard the big window at the end facing the river flung open, the next instant she was in sight at the other extremity of the Gallery. Evidently she was running about, examining all the things. She came to a window presently and cried : " I wish you'd come and tell me all about it." " I don't think I will," he called back. " Oh, well——! " she laughed impatiently, and disappeared. Minutes passed and he did not see her again ; she must have settled down somewhere, he supposed ; or perhaps her interest was exhausted and she had gone off to her father's room. No, there she was, flitting past a window again. His reluctance gave way before curiosity and attraction. Flinging away his cigar, he got up and walked slowly into the house.

The passage outside the Gallery was dimly lighted, and the door of the Gallery was open. Harry stood in the shadow

unseen, watching intently every movement of the girl's. She was looking at a case of miniatures and medals, memorials of beauties and of warriors. She turned from them to the picture of an Elizabethan countess, splendid in ruff and rich in embroidery. She caught up a candle and held it over her head, up toward the picture. Then setting the candle down she ran to the end window and looked out on the night. Addie Tristram's tall armchair still stood by the window. Cecily threw herself into it, sighing and stretching her arms in a delighted weariness. Mina Zabriska could make out a figure in the Long Gallery now.

Slowly and irresolutely Harry Tristram came in ; Cecily's face was not turned toward the door, and he stood unnoticed just within the threshold. His eyes ranged round the room but came back to Cecily. She was very quiet, but he saw her breast rise and fall in quick breathing. She was stirred and moved. A strange agitation, an intensity of feeling, came over him as he stood there motionless, everything seeming motionless around him, while his ancestors and hers looked down on them from the walls, down on their successors. The Lords of Blent were about him. Their trophies and their treasures decked the room. And she sat there in Addie Tristram's chair, in Addie Tristram's place, in Addie Tristram's attitude. Did the dead know the secret ? Did the pictures share it ? Who was to them the Lord of Blent ?

He shook off these idle fancies—a man should not give way to them—and walked up the room with a steady assured tread. Even then she did not seem to hear him till he spoke.

" Well, do you like it ? " he asked, leaning against a table in the middle of the upper part of the room, a few feet from the chair where she sat. Now Mina Zabriska made out two figures, cast up by the bright light against the darkness, and watched them with an eagerness that had no reason in it.

" Like it ! " she cried, springing to her feet, running to him, holding out her hands. " Like it ! Oh, Harry ! Why, it's better than all the rest. Better, even better ! "

" It's rather a jolly room," said Harry. " The pictures and all the things about make it look well."

" Oh, I'm not going to say anything if you talk like that. You don't feel like that !—' Rather a jolly room ! ' That's

what one says if the inn parlour's comfortable. This isn't a room. It's—it's——"

"Shall we call it a temple?" he suggested, smiling.

"I believe it's heaven—the private particular Tristram heaven. They're all here!" She waved toward the pictures. "Here in a heaven of their own."

"And we're allowed to visit it before we die?"

"Yes. At least I am. You let me visit it. It belongs to you—to the dead and you."

"Do you want to stay here any longer?" he asked with a sudden roughness.

"Yes, lots longer," she laughed defiantly, quite undismayed. "You needn't, though. You'll have it all your life. Perhaps I shall never have it again. Father's better! And I don't know if you'll ever ask us here again. You never did before, you know. So I mean to have all of it I can get." She darted away from him and ran back to the miniatures. A richly ornamented sword hung on the wall just above them. This caught her notice; she took it down and unsheathed it.

"*Henricus Baro Tristram de Blent*," she spelt out from the enamelled steel. "*Per Ensem Justitia.* What does that mean? No, I know. Rather a good motto, cousin Harry. 'That he shall take who has the power, and he shall keep who can!' That was his justice, I expect!"

"Do you quarrel with it? If this was all yours, would you give it up?"

"Not without a fight!" she laughed. "*Per Ensem Justitia!*" She waved the blade.

Harry left her busy with the things that were so great a delight and walked to the window at the other end of the long room. Thence he watched, now her, now the clouds that lounged off and on to the moon's disc. More and more, though, his eyes were caught by her and glued to her; she was the centre of the room; it seemed all made and prepared for her even as it had seemed for Addie Tristram. The motto ran in his head—*Per Ensem Justitia.* What was the justice and what the sword? He woke to the cause of the changed mood in him and of the agitation in which he had been living. It was nothing to defy the law, to make light of a dry abstraction, to find right against it in his blood. His

opponent now was no more the law, it was no more even some tiresome, unknown, unrealized girl in London, with surroundings most unpicturesque and associations that had no power to touch his heart. Here was the enemy, this creature whose every movement claimed the blood that was hers, whose coming repaired the loss Blent had suffered in losing Addie Tristram, whose presence crowned its charms with a new glory. Nature that fashioned her in the Tristram image—had it not put in her hand the sword by which she should win justice? The thought passed through his mind now without a shock; he seemed to see her mistress of Blent; for the moment he forgot himself as anyone save an onlooker; he did not seem concerned.

Once more he roused himself. He had fallen into a fear of the fancies that threatened to carry him he did not know where. He wanted to get away from this room with its suggestions, and from the presence that gave them such force.

"Aren't you ready yet?" he called to her. "It's getting late."

"Are you still there?" she cried back in a gay affectation of surprise. "I'd forgotten all about you, I thought I had it to myself. I was trying to think it was all mine."

"Shall we go downstairs?" His voice was hard and constrained.

"No, I won't," she said squarely. "I can't go. It's barely ten o'clock. Come, we'll talk here. You smoke—or is that high treason?—and I'll sit here." She threw herself into Addie Tristram's great chair. There was a triumphant gaiety in her air that spoke of her joy in all about her, of her sense of the boundless satisfaction that her surroundings gave. "I love it all so much," she murmured, half perhaps to herself, yet still as a plea to him that he would not seek to hurry her from the place.

Harry turned away, again with that despair on him. She gave him permission to go, but he could not leave her—neither her nor now the room. Yet he was afraid that he could not answer for himself if he stayed. It was too strange that every association, and every tradition, and every emotion which had through all the years seemed to justify and even to sanctify his own position and the means he was taking to preserve it, should

in two or three days begin to desert him, and should now in this hour openly range themselves against him and on her side ; so that all he invoked to aid him pleaded for her, all that he had prayed to bless him and his enterprise blessed her and cursed the work to which he had put his hand.

Which of them could best face the world without Blent ? Which of them could best look the world in the face having Blent ? These were the questions that rose in his mind with tempestuous insistence.

" I could sit here for ever," she murmured, a lazy enjoyment succeeding to the agile movements of her body and the delighted agitation of her nerves. " It just suits me to sit here, cousin Harry, looking like a great lady ! " Her eyes challenged him to deny that she looked the part to perfection. She glanced through the window. " I met that funny little Madame Zabriska who lives up at Merrion Lodge to-day. She seems very anxious to know all about us."

" Madame Zabriska has a healthy—or unhealthy—curiosity." The mention of Mina was a fresh prick. Mina knew ; suddenly he hated that she should know.

" Is she in love with you ? " asked Cecily, mockingly yet languidly, indeed as a great lady might inquire about the less exalted, condescending to be amused.

" Nobody's in love with me, not even the girl who's going to marry me."

" To marry you ? " She sat up, looking at him. " Are you engaged ? "

" Yes, to Janie Iver. You know who I mean ? "

" Yes, I know. You're going to be married to her ? "

" I asked her a week ago. To-day she wrote to say she'd have me." He was on his feet even as he spoke. " To marry me and to marry all this, you know."

She was too sympathetic to waste breath on civil pretences.

" To be mistress here ? To own this ? To be Lady Tristram of Blent ? "

" Yes. To have what—what I'm supposed to have," said he.

Cecily regarded him intently for another moment. Then she sank back into Addie Tristram's great armchair, asking, " Will she do it well ? "

" No," said Harry. " She's a good sort, but she won't do it well."

Cecily sighed and turned her head toward the window.

" Why do you do it ? Do you care for her ? "

" I like her. And I want money. She's very rich. Money might be useful to me."

" You seem very rich. Why do you want money ? "

" I might want it."

There was silence for a moment. " Well, I hope you'll be happy," she said presently.

She herself was the reason—the embodied reason (was reason ever more fairly embodied ?) why he was going to marry Janie Iver. The monstrousness of it rose before his mind. When he told of his engagement, there had been for an instant a look in her eyes. Wonder it was at least. Was it disappointment ? Was it at all near to consternation ? She sat very still now ; her gaiety was gone. She was like Addie Tristram still, but like Addie when the hard world used her ill, when there were aches to be borne and sins to be reckoned with. As he watched her, yet another new thing came upon him, or a thing that seemed to be as new as the last quarter chimed by the old French clock on the mantelpiece, and yet might date back so long as three days ago. Even now it hardly reached consciousness, certainly did not attain explicitness. It was still rather that Janie was no mistress for Blent and that this girl was the ideal. It was Blent still rather than himself, Blent's mistress rather than his. But it was enough to set a new edge on his questioning. Was he to be the man—he who looked on her now and saw how fair she was,—was he to be the man to deny her her own, to rob her of her right, to parade before the world in the trappings which were hers ? It was all so strange, so overwhelming. He dropped into a chair by him and pressed his hand across his brow. A low murmur, almost a groan, escaped him in the tumult of his soul. " My God ! " he whispered, in a whisper that seemed to echo through the room.

" Harry ! Are you unhappy ? " In an instant she was by him. " What is it ? I don't understand. You tell me you're engaged, and you look so unhappy. Why do you marry her if you don't love her ? Are you giving her all this—and

yourself—you yourself—without loving her ? Dear Harry—yes, you've been very good to me—dear Harry, why ? "

" Go back," he said. " Go back to your chair. Go and sit there."

With wonder in her eyes and a smile fresh-born on her lips she obeyed him.

" Well ? " she said. " You're very odd. But—why ? "

" I'm marrying her for Blent's sake—and I think she's marrying me for Blent's sake."

" I call that horrible."

" No." He sprang to his feet. " If Blent was yours, what would you do to keep it."

" Everything," she answered. " Everything—except sell myself, Harry."

She was superb. By a natural instinct, all affectation forgotten, she had thrown herself into Addie Tristram's attitude. There was the head on the bend of the arm, there was the dainty foot stuck out. There was all the defiance of a world insensate to love, greedy to find sin, dull to see grace and beauty, blind to a woman's self while it cavilled at a woman's deeds.

" Everything except sell yourself ? " he repeated, his eyes set on her face.

" Yes—*Per Ensem Justitia !* " she laughed. " But not lies, and not buying and selling, Harry."

" My word is given. I must marry her now."

" Better fling Blent away ! " she flashed out in a brilliant indignation.

" And if I did that ? "

" A woman would love you for yourself," she cried, leaning forward to him with hands clasped.

Again he rose and paced the length of the Long Gallery. The moment was come. There was a great alliance against him. He fought still. At every step he took he came to something that still was his, that he prized, that he loved, that meant much to him, that typified his position as Tristram of Blent. A separate pang waited on every step, a great agony rose in him with the thought that he might be walking this room as its master for the last time. Yes, it had come to that. For against all, threatening to conquer all, was the girl who sat

in his mother's chair, her very body asserting the claim that her thoughts did not know and her mouth could not utter. And yet his mood had affected her. The upturned eyes were full of excitement, the parted lips waited for a word from him. Mina Zabriska had left her terrace and gone to bed, declaring that she was still on Harry's side ; but she was not with him in this fight.

He returned to Cecily and stood by her. The sympathy between them kept her still ; she watched, she waited. For minutes he was silent ; all thought of time was gone. Now she knew that he had something great to say. Was it that he would and could have no more to do with Janie Iver, that another had come, that his word must go, and that he loved her ? She could hardly believe that. It was so short a time since he had seen her. Yet why could it not be true of him, if it were true of her ? And was it not ? Else why did she hang on his words and keep her eyes on his ? Else why was it so still in the room, as though the world too waited for speech from his lips ?

" I can't do it ! " burst from him suddenly. " By God, I can't do it ! "

" What, Harry ? " The words were no more than breathed. He came right up to her and caught her by the arm.

" You see all that—everything here ? You love it ? "

" Yes."

" As much as I do ? As much as I do ? " His self-control was gone. She made no answer ; she could not understand.

With an effort he mastered himself.

" Yes, you love it," he said, and a smile came on his face. " I'm glad you love it. As God lives, unless you'd loved it, I'd have spoken not a word of this. But you're one of us, you're a Tristram. I don't know the real rights of it, but I'll run no risk of cheating a Tristram. You love it all ? "

" Yes, yes, Harry. But why, dear Harry, why ? "

" Why ? Because it's yours."

He let go her hand and reeled back a step.

" Mine ? What do you mean ? " she cried. Still the idea, the wild idea, that he offered it with himself was in her mind.

" It's yours, not mine—it's never been mine. You're the owner of it. You're Tristram of Blent."

" I—I Tristram of Blent ? " She was utterly bewildered. For he was not a lover—no lover ever spoke like that.

" Yes, I say, yes." His voice rose imperiously as it pronounced the words that threw away his rule. " You're Lady Tristram of Blent."

She did not understand ; yet she believed. He spoke so that he must be believed.

" This is all yours—yours—yours. You're Tristram of Blent."

She rose to her height, and stood facing him.

" And you ? And you ? "

" I ? I'm—Harry."

" Harry ? Harry ? Harry what ? "

He smiled as he looked at her ; as his eyes met hers he smiled.

" Harry what ? Harry Nothing," he said. " Harry Nothing-at-all."

He turned and left her alone in the room. She sank back into the great armchair where Addie Tristram had been wont to sit.

CHAPTER XIV

The Very Same Day

"SHALL I wait up, my lord? Miss Gainsborough has gone to her room. I've turned out the lights and shut up the house."

Harry looked at the clock in the study. It was one o'clock.

"I thought you'd gone to bed long ago, Mason." He rose and stretched himself. "I'm going to town early in the morning. I shan't want any breakfast and I shan't take anybody with me. Tell Fisher to pack my portmanteau—things for a few days—and send it to Paddington. I'll have it fetched from there. Tell him to be ready to follow me, if I send for him."

"Yes, my lord."

"Give that letter to Miss Gainsborough in the morning." He handed Mason a thick letter. Two others lay on the table. After a moment's apparent hesitation Harry put them in his pocket. "I'll post them myself," he said. "When did Miss Gainsborough go to her room?"

"About an hour back, my lord."

"Did she stay in the Long Gallery till then?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I may be away a little while, Mason. I hope Miss Gainsborough—and Mr Gainsborough too—will be staying on some time. Make them comfortable."

Not a sign of curiosity or surprise escaped Mason. His "Yes, my lord," was just the same as though Harry had ordered an egg for breakfast. Sudden comings and goings had always been the fashion of the house.

"All right. Good night, Mason."

"Good night, my lord." Mason looked round for something to carry off—the force of habit—found nothing, and retired noiselessly.

"One o'clock!" sighed Harry. "Ah, I'm tired. I won't go to bed though, I couldn't sleep."

He moved restlessly about the room. His flood of feeling

had gone by ; for the time the power of thought too seemed to have deserted him. He had told Cecily everything ; he had told Janie enough ; he had yielded to an impulse to write a line to Mina Zabriska—because she had been so mixed up in it all. The documents that were to have proved his claim made a little heap of ashes in the grate.

All this had been two hours' hard work. But after all two hours is not long to spend in getting rid of an old life and entering on a new. He found himself rather surprised at the simplicity of the process. What was there left to do ? He had only to go to London and see his lawyer—an interview easy enough for him, though startling no doubt to the lawyer. Cecily would be put into possession of her own. There was nothing sensational. He would travel a bit perhaps, or just stay in town. He had money enough to live on quietly or to use in making more ; for his mother's savings were indubitably his, left to him by a will in which he, the real Harry, was so expressly designated by his own full name—even more than that—as " Henry Austen Fitzhubert Tristram, otherwise Henry Austen Fitzhubert, my son by the late Captain Austen Fitzhubert "—that no question of his right could arise. That money would not go with the title. Only Blent and all the realty passed with that ; the money was not affected by the date of his birth ; that must be explained to Cecily by his lawyer or perhaps she would expect to get it. For the moment there was nothing to do but to go to London—and then, perhaps, travel a bit. He smiled for an instant ; it certainly struck him as rather an anti-climax. He threw himself on a sofa and, in spite of his conviction that he could not sleep, dozed off almost directly.

It was three when he awoke ; he went up to his room, had a bath, shaved, and put on a tweed suit. Coming down to the study again, he opened the shutters and looked out. It would be light soon, and he could go away. He was fretfully impatient of staying. He drank some whiskey and soda-water, and smoked a cigar as he walked up and down. Yes, there were signs of dawn now ; the darkness lifted over the hill on which Merrion stood.

Merrion ! Yes, Merrion. And the Major ? Well, Duplay had not frightened him, Duplay had not turned him out. He

was going of his own will—of his own act anyhow, for he could not feel so sure about the will. But for the first time it struck him that his abdication might accrue to the Major's benefit, that he had won for Duplay the prize which he was sure the gallant officer could not have achieved for himself. "I'll be hanged if I do that," he muttered. "Yes, I know what I'll do," he added, smiling.

He got his hat and stick and went out into the garden. The windows of the Long Gallery were all dark. Harry smiled again and shook his fist at them. There was no light in Cecily's window. He was glad to think that the girl slept; if he were tired she must be terribly tired too. He was quite alone—alone with the old place for the last time. He walked to where he had sat with Cecily, where his mother used to sit. He was easy in his mind about his mother. When she had wanted him to keep the house and the name, she had no idea of the true state of the case. And in fact she herself had done it all by requesting him to invite the Gainsboroughs to her funeral. That was proof enough that he had not wronged her; in the mood he was in it seemed quite proof enough. Realities were still a little dim to him, and fancies rather real. His outward calmness of manner had returned, but his mind was not in a normal state. Still he was awake enough to the every-day world and to his ordinary feelings to remain very eager that his sacrifice should not turn to the Major's good.

He started at a brisk walk to the little bridge, reached the middle of it, and stopped short. The talk he had had with Mina Zabriska at this very spot came back into his mind. "The blood, not the law!" he had said. Well, it was to the blood he had bowed and not to the law. He was strong about not having been frightened by the law. Nor had he been dispossessed, he insisted on that too. He had given; he had chosen to give. He made a movement as though to walk on, but for a moment he could not. When it came to going, for an instant he could not go. The parting was difficult. He had no discontent with what he had done; on the whole it seemed far easier than he could ever have imagined. But it was hard to go, to leave Blent just as the slowly growing day brought into sight every outline that he knew so well, and began to warm the gardens into life. "I should rather like to

stay a day," was his thought, as he lingered still. But the next moment he was across the bridge, slamming the gate behind him and beginning to mount the road up the valley. He had heard a shutter thrown open and a window raised ; the sound came from the wing where Cecily slept. He did not want to see her now ; he did not wish her to see him. She was to awake to undivided possession, free from any reminder of him. That was his fancy, his idea of making his gift to her of what was hers more splendid and more complete. But she did see him ; she watched him from her window as he walked away up the valley. He did not know ; true to his fancy, he never turned his head.

Bob Broadley was an early riser, as his business in life demanded. At six o'clock he was breakfasting in a bright little room opening on his garden. He was in the middle of his rasher when a shadow fell across his plate. Looking up, he started to see Harry Tristram at the doorway.

" Lord Tristram ! " he exclaimed.

" You've called me Tristram all your life. I should think you might still," observed Harry.

" Oh, all right. But what brings you here ? These aren't generally your hours, are they ? "

" Perhaps not. May I have some breakfast ? "

The maid was summoned and brought him what he asked. She nearly dropped the cup and saucer when she realized that the Great Man was there—at six in the morning !

" I'm on my way to London," said Harry. " Going to take the train at Fillingford instead of Blentmouth, because I wanted to drop in on you. I've something to say."

" I expect I've heard. It's very kind of you to come, but I saw Janie Iver in Blentmouth yesterday."

" I dare say ; but she didn't tell you what I'm going to."

Harry, having made but a pretence of breakfasting, pushed away his plate. " I'll smoke if you don't mind. You go on eating," he said. " Do you remember a little talk we had about our friend Duplay ? We agreed that we should both like to put a spoke in his wheel."

" And you've done it," said Bob, reaching for his pipe from the mantelpiece.

" I did do it. I can't do it any more. You know there

were certain reasons which made a marriage between Janie Iver and me seem desirable? I'm saying nothing against her, and I don't intend to say a word against myself. Well, those reasons no longer exist. I have written to her to say so. She'll get that letter this afternoon."

"You've written to break off the engagement?" Bob spoke slowly and thoughtfully, but with no great surprise.

"Yes. She accepted me under a serious misapprehension. When I asked her I was in a position to which I had no——" He interrupted himself, frowning a little. Not even now was he ready to say that. "In a position which I no longer occupy," he amended, recovering his placidity. "All the world will know that very soon. I am no longer owner of Blent."

"What?" cried Bob, jumping up and looking hard at Harry. The surprise came now.

"And I am no longer what you called me just now—Lord Tristram. You know the law about succeeding to peerages and entailed lands? Very well. My birth has been discovered [he smiled for an instant] not to satisfy that law—the merits of which, Bob, we won't discuss. Consequently not I but Miss Gainsborough succeeds my mother in the title and the property. I have informed Miss Gainsborough—I ought to say Lady Tristram—of these facts, and I'm on my way to London to see the lawyers and get everything done in proper order."

"Good God, do you mean what you say?"

"Oh, of course I do. Do you take me for an idiot, to come up here at six in the morning to talk balderdash?" Harry was obviously irritated. "Everybody will know soon. I came to tell you because I fancy you've some concern in it, and, as I say, I still want that spoke put in the Major's wheel."

Bob sat down and was silent for many moments, smoking hard.

"But Janie won't do that," he broke out at last. "She's too straight, too loyal. If she's accepted you——"

"A beautiful idea, Bob, if she was in love with me. But she isn't. Can you tell me you think she is?"

Bob grunted inarticulately—an obvious, though not a skilful, evasion of the question.

" And anyhow," Harry pursued, " the thing's at an end. I shan't marry her. Now if that suggests any action on your part I—well, I shall be glad I came to breakfast," He got up and went to the window, looking out on the neat little garden and to the paddock beyond.

In a moment Bob Broadley's hand was laid on his shoulder. He turned and faced him.

" What a thing for you ! You—you lose it all ? "

" I have given it all up."

" I can't realize it, you know. The change——"

" Perhaps I can't either. I don't know that I want to, Bob."

" Who made the discovery ? How did it come out ? Nobody ever had any suspicion of it ! "

Harry looked at him long and thoughtfully. But in the end he only shook his head, saying, " Well, its true anyhow."

" It beats me. I see what you mean about myself and—— Still I give you my word I hate its happening. Who's this girl ? Why is she to come here ? Who knows anything about her ? "

" You don't, of course," Harry conceded with a smile. " No more did I a week ago."

" Couldn't you have made a fight for it ? "

" Yes, a deuced good fight. But I chose to let it go. Now don't go on looking as if you didn't understand the thing. It's simple enough."

" But Lady Tristram—your mother—must have known——"

" The question didn't arise as long as my mother lived," said Harry quickly. " Her title was all right, of course."

There was another question on the tip of Bob's tongue, but after a glance at Harry's face he did not put it ; he could not ask Harry if he had known.

" I'm hanged ! " he muttered.

" Yes, but you understand why I came here ? "

" Yes. That was kind."

" Oh, no. I want to spike the Major's guns, you know." He laughed a little. " And—well, yes, I think I'm promoting the general happiness too, if you must know. Now I'm off, Bob."

He held out his hand and Bob grasped it. " We'll meet again some day, when things have settled down. Beat Duplay for me, Bob. Good-bye."

" That's grit, real grit," muttered Bob as he returned to the house after seeing Harry Tristram on his way.

It was that—or else the intoxication of some influence whose power had not passed away. Whatever it was, it had a marked effect on Bob Broadley. There was an appearance of strength and resolution about it—as of a man knowing what he meant to do and doing it. As he inspected his pigs an hour later, Bob came to the conclusion that he himself was a poor sort of fellow. People who waited for the fruit to fall into their mouths were apt to find that a hand intervened and plucked it. That had happened to him once, and probably he could not have helped it ; but he meant to try to prevent its happening again. He was in a ferment all the morning, partly on his own account, as much about the revolution which had suddenly occurred in the little kingdom on the banks of the Blent.

In the afternoon he had his gig brought round and set out for Blentmouth. As he passed Blent Hall, he saw a girl on the bridge—a girl in black looking down at the water. Lady Tristram ? It was strange to call her by the title that had been another's. But he supposed it must be Lady Tristram. She did not look up as he passed ; he retained a vision of the slack dreariness of her pose. Going on, he met the Iver carriage ; Iver and Neeld sat in it, side by side ; they waved their hands in careless greeting and went on talking earnestly. On the outskirts of the town he came on Miss Swinkerton and Mrs Trumbler walking together. As he raised his hat, a dim and wholly inadequate idea occurred to him of the excitement into which these good ladies would soon be thrown, a foreshadowing of the wonder, the consternation, the questionings, the bubbling emotions which were soon to stir the quiet backwaters of the villas of Blentmouth. For himself, what was he going to do ? He could not tell. He put up his gig at the inn and sauntered out into the street ; still he could not tell. But he wandered out to Fairholme, up to the gate, and past it, and back to it, and past it again.

Now would Harry Tristram do that ? No ; either he would never have come or he would have been inside before this. Bob's new love of boldness did not let him consider whether this was the happiest moment for its display. Those learned

in the lore of such matters would probably have advised him to let her alone for a few days, or weeks, or months, according to the subtilty of their knowledge or their views. Bob rang the bell.

Janie was not denied to him, but only because no chance was given to her of denying herself. A footman, unconscious of convulsions external or internal, showed him into the morning-room. But Janie's own attitude was plain enough in her reception of him.

"Oh, Bob, why in the world did you come here to-day? Indeed I can't talk to you to-day." Her dismay was evident. "If there's nothing very particular——"

"Well, you know there is," Bob interrupted.

She turned her head quickly toward him. "I know there is? What do you mean?"

"You've got Harry Tristram's letter, I suppose?"

"What do you know of Harry Tristram's letter?"

"I haven't seen it, but I know what's in it all the same."

"How do you know?"

"He came up to Mingham to-day and told me." Bob sat down by her, uninvited; certainly the belief in boldness was carrying him far. But he did not quite anticipate the next development. She sprang up, sprang away from his neighbourhood, crying:

"Then how dare you come here to-day? Yes, I've got the letter—just an hour ago. Have you come to—to triumph over me?"

"What an extraordinary idea!" remarked Bob in the slow tones of a genuine astonishment.

"You'd call it to condole, I suppose! That's rather worse."

Bob confined himself to a long look at her. It brought him no enlightenment.

"You must see that you're the very——" She broke off abruptly, and, turning away, began to walk up and down.

"The very what?" asked Bob.

She turned and looked at him; she broke into a peevishly nervous laugh. Anybody but Bob—really anybody but Bob—would have known! The laugh encouraged him a little, which, again, it had no right to do.

"I thought you'd be in trouble, and like a bit of cheering

up," he said with a diplomatic air that was ludicrously obvious.

She considered a moment, taking another turn about the room to do it.

"What did Harry Tristram say to you?"

"Oh, he told me the whole thing. That—that he's chucked it up, you know."

"I mean about me."

"He didn't say much about you. Just that it was all ended, you know."

"Did he think I should accept his withdrawal?"

"Yes, he seemed quite sure of it," answered Bob. "I had my doubts, but he seemed quite sure of it." Apparently Bob considered his statement reassuring and comforting.

"You had your doubts?"

"Yes. I thought perhaps——"

"You were wrong then, and Harry Tristram was right." She flung the words at him in a fierce hostility. "Now he's not Lord Tristram any longer, I don't want to marry him." She paused. "You believe he isn't, don't you? There's no doubt?"

"I believe him all right. He's a fellow you can rely on."

"But it's all so strange. Why has he done it? Well, that doesn't matter. At any rate he's right about me."

Bob sat stolidly in his chair. He did not know at all what to say, but he did not mean to go. He had put no spoke in the Major's wheel yet, and to do that was his contract with Harry Tristram, as well as his own strong desire.

"Have you sympathized—or condoled—or triumphed—enough?" she asked; she was fierce still.

"I don't know that I've had a chance of saying anything much," he observed with some justice.

"I really don't see what you can have to say. What is there to say?"

"Well, there's just this to say—that I'm jolly glad of it."

She was startled by his blunt sincerity, so startled that she passed the obvious chance of accusing him of cruelty toward Harry Tristram, and thought only of how his words touched herself.

" Glad of it ! Oh, if you knew how it makes me feel about myself ! But you don't, or you'd never be here now."

" Why shouldn't I be here now ? " He spoke slowly, as though he were himself searching for any sound reason.

" Oh, it's——" The power of explanation failed her. People who will not see obvious things sometimes hold a very strong position. Janie began to feel rather helpless. " Do go. I don't want anybody to come and find you here." She had turned from command to entreaty.

" I'm jolly glad," he resumed, settling himself back in his chair, " that the business between you and Harry Tristram's all over. It ought never to have gone so far, you know."

" Are you out of your mind to-day, Bob ? "

" And now, what about the Major, Miss Janie ? "

She flushed red in indignation, perhaps in guilt too. " How dare you ? You've no business to——"

" I don't know the right way to say things, I dare say," he admitted, but with an abominable tranquillity. " Still I expect you know what I mean all the same."

" Do you accuse me of having encouraged Major Duplay ? "

" I should say you'd been pretty pleasant to him. But it's not my business to worry myself about Duplay."

" I wish you always understood as well what isn't your business."

" And it isn't what you have done but what you're going to do that I'm interested in." He paused several moments and then went on very slowly : " I tell you what it is. I'm not very proud of myself. So, if you happen to be feeling the same, why that's all right, Miss Janie. The fact is, I let Harry Tristram put me in a funk, you know. He was a swell, and he's got a sort of way about him too. But I'm hanged if I'm going to be in a funk of Duplay." He seemed to ask her approval of the proposed firmness of his attitude. " I've been a bit of an ass about it all, I think," he concluded with an air of thoughtful inquiry.

The opening was irresistible. Janie seized it with impetuous carelessness. " Yes, you have, you have indeed. Only I don't see why you think it's over, I'm sure."

" Well, I'm glad you agree with me," said he. But he seemed now rather uncertain how he ought to go on. " That's

what I wanted to say," he added, and looked at her as if he thought she might give him a lead.

The whole thing was preposterous ; Janie was bewildered. He had outraged all decency in coming at such a moment and in talking like this. Then having got (by such utter disregard of all decency) to a point at which he could not possibly stop, he stopped ! He even appeared to ask her to go on for him ! She stood still in the middle of the room, looking at him as he sat squarely in his chair.

" Since you said what you wanted to say, I should think you might go."

" Yes, I suppose I might, but——" He was puzzled. He had said what he wanted to say, or thought he had, but it had failed to produce the situation he had anticipated from it. If he went now, leaving matters just as they stood, could he be confident that the spoke was in the wheel ? Up to now nothing was really agreed upon except that he himself had been an ass. No doubt this was a pregnant conclusion, but Bob was not quite clear exactly how much it involved ; while it encouraged him, it left him still doubtful. " But don't you think you might tell me what you think about it ? " he asked in the end.

" I think I'm not fit to live," cried Janie. " That's what I think about it, Bob." Her voice trembled ; she was afraid she might cry soon if something did not happen to relieve the strain of this interview. " And you saw what Harry thought by his sending me that letter. The very moment it happened, he sent me that letter ! "

" I saw what he thought pretty well, anyhow," said Bob, smiling reflectively again.

" Oh, yes, if that makes it any better for me ! "

" Well, if he's not miserable, I don't see why you need be."

" The things you don't see would fill an encyclopædia ! "

Bob looked at his watch ; the action seemed in the nature of an ultimatum ; his glance from the watch to Janie heightened the impression.

" You've nothing more to say ? " he asked her.

" No. I agreed with what you said—that you'd been—an ass. I don't know that you've said anything else."

" All right." He got up and came to her, holding out his hand. " Good-bye for the present, then."

She took his hand—and she held it. She could not let it go. Bob allowed it to lie in hers.

" Oh, dear old Bob, I'm so miserable ; I hate myself for having done it, and I hate myself worse for being so glad it's undone. It did seem best till I did it. No, I suppose I really wanted the title and—and all that. I do hate myself ! And now—the very same day—I let you——"

" You haven't let me do much," he suggested consolingly.

" Yes, I have. At least——" She came a little nearer to him. He took hold of her other hand. He drew her to him and held her in his arms.

" That's all right," he remarked, still in tones of consolation.

" If anybody knew this ! You won't say a word, will you, Bob ? Not for ever so long ? You will pretend it was ever so long before I—I mean, between——? "

" I'll tell any lie," said Bob very cheerfully.

She laughed hysterically. " Because I should never be able to look people in the face if anybody knew that on the very same day——"

" I should think a—a week would be about right ? "

" A week ! No, no. Six months."

" Oh, six months be——"

" Well then, three ? Do agree to three."

" We'll think about three. Still miserable, Janie ? "

" Yes, still—rather. Now you must go. Fancy if anybody came ! "

" All right, I'll go. But, I say, you might just drop a hint to the Major."

" I can't send him another message that I'm—that I've done it again ! "

She drew a little away from him. Bob's hearty laugh rang out ; his latent sense of humour was touched at the idea of this second communication to the Major. For a moment Janie looked angry, for a moment deeply hurt. Bob laughed still. There was nothing for it but to join in. Her own laugh rang out gaily as he caught her in his arms again and kissed her.

" Oh, if anybody knew ! " sighed Janie.

But Bob was full of triumph. The task was done, the spoke

was in the wheel. There was an end of the Major as well as of Harry—and an end to his own long and not very hopeful waiting. He kissed his love again.

There was a sudden end to the scene too—startling and sudden. The door of the room opened abruptly, and in the doorway stood Mrs Iver. Little need to dilate on the situation as it appeared to Mrs Iver ! Had she known the truth, the thing was bad enough. But she knew nothing of Harry Tristram's letter. After a moment of consternation Janie ran to her crying :

" I'm not engaged any more to Harry Tristram, mother ! "

Mrs Iver said nothing. She stood by the open door. There was no mistaking her meaning. With a shamefaced bow, struggling with an unruly smile, Bob Broadley got through it somehow. Janie was left alone with Mrs Iver.

Such occurrences as these are very deplorable. Almost of necessity they impair a daughter's proper position of superiority and put her in a relation toward her mother which no self-respecting young woman would desire to occupy. It might be weeks before Janie Iver could really assert her dignity again. It was strong proof of her affection for Bob Broadley that, considering the matter in her own room (she had not been exactly sent there, but a retreat had seemed advisable) she came to the conclusion that, taking good and bad together, she was on the whole glad that he had called.

But to Bob, with the selfishness of man, Mrs Iver's sudden appearance wore rather an amusing aspect. It certainly could not spoil his triumph or impair his happiness.

CHAPTER XV

An Inquisition Interrupted

"MY mother told it me just as a bit of gossip. She didn't believe it, no more did I."

"But you repeated it."

It was Iver who was pressing her. He was not now the kind host Mina knew so well. He was rather the keen man of business, impatient of shuffling, incredulous of any action for which he could not see the motive, distrustful and very shrewd.

"Oh, I repeated it to my uncle, because I thought it might amuse him—just for something to say."

"Your idea of small talk is rather peculiar," was Iver's dry comment. He looked at the Major on his right, and at Neeld on his left at the table; Mina was opposite, like the witness before the committee.

"So is yours of politeness," she cried. "It's my house. Why do you come and bully me in it?"

Duplay was suddenly furious. Poor Mr Neeld's state was lamentable. He had not spoken a word throughout the interview. He had taken refuge in nodding, exhausting the significance of nods in reply to the various appeals that the other three addressed to him. If their meaning had been developed, his nods must have landed him in a pitiable mess of inconsistencies; he had tried to agree with everybody, to sympathize all round, to endorse universally. He had won momentary applause, and in the end created general dissatisfaction.

Iver had his temper in hand still, but he was hard and resolute.

"You don't seem to understand the seriousness of the thing in the least," he said. "I've spoken plainly to you. My daughter's future is at stake. You say it was all idle gossip. I find that hard to believe. Even if so, I must have that gossip investigated and proved to be nothing but gossip."

"Investigate it then," said the Imp peevishly.

" You refuse me the materials. What you told Major Duplay was too vague. You know more. You can put me on the track."

Mina was silent. Neeld wiped his brow with his handkerchief. Iver changed his tone.

" Mina, we've been friends to you. I'm not ashamed to remind you of it. Janie's a great friend of yours ; my wife and I have welcomed you first for her sake, then for your own. Is this the best return you can make us ? Consult anybody you like, if you think I'm prejudiced, whether your conduct is honourable, is square." He paused a moment. " Ask Mr Neeld here what he would do. I'm willing to abide by his judgment."

Mina was sorely tempted to say : " Ask him then." The situation would thus become so much the more piquant. But Mr Neeld was in such distress—to her sharp eyes a distress so visible—that she did not dare to risk the *coup*. If he were let alone he might keep silence and quiet his conscience by the plea that he had been asked no questions. But she did not venture to face him with a demand for a verdict on her conduct ; for her conduct was also his own.

" I must judge for myself. Mr Neeld can't help me," she answered. " Uncle has chosen to say he can prove these things. Let him try." She drew herself up with a prim, prudish air. " I don't think it's desirable to mix myself up in such very peculiar questions at all, and I don't think it's nice of men to come and cross-question me about them."

" Oh, we're not in a girls' school," said Iver, with a touch of irritation hardly suppressed. " We come as men of the world to a sensible woman."

" Anybody will tell you I'm not that," interrupted the Imp.

" Well, then, to a woman of good feeling, who wishes to be honest and to be true to her friends. Duplay, have you no influence with Madame Zabriska ? "

" I've spared no effort," replied the Major. " I can't believe that she won't help us in the end." His tone was almost menacing. Mina, remembering how he had terrorized the secret out of her before, and resenting the humiliation of the memory, stiffened her neck once more.

" I've nothing to say. You must do as you think best," she said.

" You must be made to speak."

Iver's threats alarmed where Duplay's only annoyed. He spoke calmly and with weight.

" Who can make me speak ? " she cried, more angry from her fear.

" The law. When we have reached a certain stage in the inquiry, we shall be able to compel you to speak."

" I thought you couldn't move a step without me ? "

Iver was rather set back, but he braved it out.

" The difficulties are immensely increased, but they're not insuperable," he said.

" I shan't stay to be questioned and bullied. I shall go abroad."

Iver looked at the Major ; the Major returned his glance ; they were both resolute men.

" No, you won't go away," declared Iver slowly.

The Imp was frightened ; she was an ignorant young woman in a land of whose laws she knew nothing. Neeld would have liked to suggest something soothing about the Liberty of the Individual and the Habeas Corpus Act. But he dared show no sympathy—beyond nodding at her unobserved. The nod told her nothing

" You'll stop me ? " Still she tried to sneer defiantly.

Another glance passed between Iver and Duplay. A shrewd observer might have interpreted it as meaning, " Even if we can't do it, she'll think we can."

" We shall," said the Major, executing the bluff on behalf of himself and his partner.

The Imp thought of crying—not for her uncle—which would be hopeless—but for Iver. She concluded it would be hopeless there too ; Iver would not heed tears in business hours, however tender-hearted he might be in private life. So she laughed again instead. But the laugh was a failure, and Iver was sharp enough to see it.

" In this country people aren't allowed to play fast and loose in this fashion," he remarked. " I'll tell you one way in which we can make you speak. I have only to go to Lord Tristram and tell him you have spread these reports, that you

have made and repeated these imputations on his birth and on his title. What will he do ? Can he rest content without disproving them at law ? I say he can't. In those proceedings you would be compelled to speak. I must assume you would tell the truth. I refuse to suppose you would commit perjury."

" I should hold my tongue," said Mina.

" Then you'd be sent to prison for contempt of Court."

The bluff worked well. Mina knew nothing at all of what Harry Tristram would do, or might do, or must do, of what the law would, or might, or might not do, in the circumstances supposed. And Iver spoke as though he knew everything, with a weighty confidence, with an admirable air of considered candour. She was no match for him ; she grew rather pale, her lips twitched, and her breath came quick. Tears were no longer to be treated merely as a possible policy ; they threatened to occur of their own accord.

What wonder that a feeling of intolerable meanness attacked Mr Jenkinson Neeld ? He was on the wrong side of the table, on the bench instead of in the dock. He sat there judging ; his proper place was side by side with the criminal, in charge of the same policeman, wearing the handcuffs too. And he had less excuse for his crime than she. He was even more in Iver's debt ; he had eaten his bread these weeks past ; even now he was pretending to be his adviser and his witness ; his deception was deeper than hers. Besides he was not a young woman who might find excuse in the glamour of Harry's position or the attraction of Harry's eyes ; he was not a romantic young woman ; he was only a romantic old fool. He could bear it no longer. He must speak. He could not get into the dock beside her—for that would throw away the case which she was defending so gallantly—but he must speak a word for her.

" In my opinion," he said nervously, but not without his usual precision, " we can carry this matter no further. Madame Zabriska declines to speak. I may say that I understand and respect the motive which I believe inspires her. She regrets her idle words. She thinks that by repeating them she would give them greater importance. She does not wish to assume responsibility. She leaves the matter in your hands, Iver.

It is not her affair ; she had no reason to suppose that it would be yours. By a train of events for which she is not accountable the question has become of importance to you. In her view it is for you to take your own steps. She stands aside."

" She's my friend, she's my daughter's friend. The question is whether my daughter marries Lord Tristram of Blent or an impostor (whether voluntary or involuntary) without a name, an acre, or, so far as I know, a shilling. She can help me. She stands aside. You think her right, Neeld ? "

" Yes, I do," said the old gentleman with the promptness of desperation.

" Then your idea of friendship differs diametrically from mine. I desire no such friends as that."

It is to be hoped that the sting of Iver's remark was somewhat mitigated by Mina's covertly telegraphed gratitude. Yet Neeld was no happier after his effort than before it. A silence fell on them all. Mina glanced from her uncle's face to Iver's. Both men were stern and gloomy. Her sense of heroism barely supported her ; things were so very uncomfortable. If Harry could know what she suffered for him, it would be something. But Mina had an idea that Harry was thinking very little about her. Moreover, in taking sides in a controversy, perhaps the most important practical question is—Whom has one got to live with ? She had to live not with Harry Tristram, but with that glowering uncle, Major Duplay. Agree with your enemy whiles you are in the house with him, even more than whiles you are in the way.

At this point—the deadlock demanded by the canons of art having been reached by the force of circumstances and the clash of wills—enter the *Deus ex Machina*, in the shape of a pretty parlourmaid in a black gown and white apron, with a bow of pink ribbon at her neck ; instead of the car, a silver salver, and on it a single letter.

" For you, ma'am," said the *Deus*, and with a glance at Neeld (merely because he was a man and a stranger) she ended her brief but momentous appearance on the stage.

The Imp was in no mood for ceremony ; one glance at the handwriting, and she tore the envelope open eagerly. Iver was whispering to Duplay. Neeld's eyes were on the ceiling,

because he did not know where else he could direct them with any sense of safety.

Mina read. A gasp of breath from her brought Neeld's eyes down from their refuge and stayed Iver and the Major's whispered talk. She gazed from one to the other of them. She had flushed red ; her face was very agitated and showed a great stress of feeling. Duplay with an exclamation of surprise put out his hand for the letter. But Mina kept hers on it, pinning it immovably to the table. For another minute she sat there, facing the three. Then all composure failed her ; she burst into tears, and bowing her head to meet her arms on the table, covering the letter with her hair, she sobbed violently.

The fort she had been defending was betrayed from within. For some reason unknown, unguessable, the champion she fought for had fled from the fight. And the few words of his message—aye, and that he should send a message to her—pierced her to the heart. Strained already by her battle, she was broken down by this sudden end to it, this sudden and disastrous end.

" I can't help it, I can't help it," the men heard her say between her sobs.

Her apology did nothing to relieve their extreme discomfort. All three felt brutal ; even the Major's face lost its gloomy fierceness and relaxed into an embarrassed solicitude. " Ought we to call the maid ? " he whispered. " Poor child ! " murmured Neeld.

The sobs dominated these timid utterances. Was it they who had brought her to this state, or was it the letter ? Iver stirred uneasily in his chair, his business manner and uncharitable shrewdness suddenly seeming out of place. " Give her time," he said gently. " Give her time, poor girl."

Mina raised her head ; tears ran down her cheeks ; she was woe personified.

" Time's no use," she groaned. " It's all over now."

Neeld caught at the state of affairs by an intuition to which his previous knowledge helped him. Duplay had been baffled by Harry's diplomacy and expected no action from his side. To Neeld such a development seemed possible, and it was the only thing which to his mind could throw light on Mina's behaviour.

" Won't you show us the letter ? " he asked gently.

" Oh, yes. And I'll tell you anything you like now. It doesn't matter now." She looked at Neeld ; she was loyal to the end. " I was the only person who knew it," she said to Iver.

That was too much. Timid he might be, even to the point of cowardice ; but now, when the result of confession would be no harm to anybody but himself, Neeld felt he must speak if he were to have any chance of going on thinking himself a gentleman—and it is an unpleasant thing for a man to realize that he has none.

" I must correct Madame Zabriska," he said. " I knew it too."

" What ? " cried Duplay. Iver turned quick scrutinizing eyes on his friend.

" You knew too ? You knew what ? " he demanded.

" The facts we have been endeavouring to obtain from Madame Zabriska."

" The facts about——"

" Oh, it's all in the letter," cried Mina in a quick burst of impatience. " There it is."

She flung it across to Iver and rested her chin on her hands, while her eyes followed his expression as he read. Duplay was all excitement, but old Mr Neeld had sunk back in his chair with a look of fretful weariness. Iver was deliberate ; his glasses needed some fitting on ; the sheet of paper required some smoothing after its contact with Mina's disordered and disordering hair. Besides, he was really as excited as Duplay and almost as agitated as Mina herself. But these emotions are not appropriate to business men. So he was very calm and deliberate in his demeanour ; he might have been going to deliver a whole speech from the way he cleared his throat.

" I have thrown up the sponge and fled. Please make friends with Lady Tristram of Blent.—H. T."

It was enough. What need of further witness ? And if there had been, the principal criminal had confessed and the lips of his accomplices were unsealed.

For a while nobody spoke. Then Neeld, leaning forward to the table again, began to explain and excuse his silence, to speak of the hard case he was in, of the accidental and confidential

character of his knowledge. Neither Mina nor her uncle even appeared to heed him. Iver seemed to listen patiently and courteously, but his mind too was distracted, and he did not cease fidgeting with Harry Tristram's letter and referring ever and again to its brief sufficient message.

" I dare say I was wrong. The position was very difficult," pleaded Neeld.

" Yes, yes," said Iver in an absent tone. " Difficult no doubt, Neeld ; both for you and Mina. And now he has—he has given up the game himself ! Or was his hand forced ? "

" No," flashed out Mina, restored in a moment to animation, her fighting instincts awake again. " He'd never have been forced. He must have done it of his own accord."

" But why ? " Again he returned to the letter. " And why does he write to you ? "

" Because he knew I knew about it. He didn't know that Mr Neeld did."

" And this—this Lady Tristram of Blent ? " Iver's voice was hesitating and conscious as he pronounced the name that was to have become his daughter's.

Again the pink-ribboned *Deus* made entry on the scene, to give the speaker a more striking answer.

" A lady to see you, ma'am. Miss Gainsborough."

The three men sprang to their feet ; with a sudden wrench Mina turned her chair round toward the door. A tall slim girl in black came in with a quick yet hesitating step.

" Forgive me, Madame Zabriska. But I had to come. Harry said you were his friend. Do you know anything about him ? Do you know where he is ? " She looked at the men and blushed as she returned their bow with a hurried recognition.

" No, I haven't seen him. I know nothing," said Mina.

" The letter, Mina," Duplay reminded her, and Mina held it out to Cecily.

Cecily came forward, took and read it. She looked again at the group, evidently puzzled.

" He doesn't say where he's gone," she said.

" You are——? " Iver began.

" I'm Cecily Gainsborough. But I think he means me when he says Lady Tristram of Blent."

" Yes, he must mean you, Miss Gainsborough."

" Yes, because last night he told me—— It was so strange, but he wouldn't have done it unless it was true—he told me that he wasn't Lord Tristram really, and that I——" Her eyes travelled quickly over their faces, and she re-read the letter. " Do you know anything about it ? " she demanded imperiously. " Tell me, do you know what he means by this letter and whether what he says is true ? "

" We know what he means," answered Iver gravely, " and we know that it's true."

" Have you known it long ? " she asked.

Iver glanced at Duplay and Neeld. It was Neeld who answered gently : " Some of us have been sure of it for some time. But——" He looked at Mina before he went on. " But we didn't intend to speak."

Cecily stood there, seeming to consider and for a moment meeting Mina's intense gaze which had never left her face.

" Had he known for long ? " was her next question.

It met with no immediate answer. Duplay rose abruptly and walked to the mantelpiece ; he leant his arm on it and turned half away from the group at the table.

" Had he known for long ? " Cecily repeated.

" Ever so long," answered Mina Zabriska in a low voice, but very confidently.

" Ah, he was waiting till Lady Tristram died ? "

Iver nodded ; he thought what she suggested a very good explanation to accept. It was plausible and sensible ; it equipped Harry Tristram with a decent excuse for his past silence, and a sound reason for the moment of his disclosure. He looked at Neeld and found ready acquiescence in the old gentleman's approving nod. But Mina broke out impatiently :

" No, no, that had nothing to do with it. He never meant to speak. Blent was all the world to him. He never meant to speak." A quick remembrance flashed across her. " Were you with him in the Long Gallery last night ? " she cried. " With him there for hours ? "

" Yes, we were there."

" Yes, I saw you from the terrace here. Did he tell you there ? "

" He told me there." There was embarrassment as well as wonder in her manner now.

" Well then, you must know why he told you. We don't know." Mina was very peevish.

" Is it any use asking——? " Iver began. An unceremoniously impatient and peremptory wave of Mina's arm reduced him to silence. Her curiosity left no room for his prudent counsels of reticence.

" What were you doing in the Gallery ? " demanded Mina.

" I was looking at all the things there and—and admiring them. He came up presently and—I don't remember that he said very much. He watched me ; then he asked me if I loved the things. And—well, then he told me. He told me and went straight out of the room. I waited a long while, but he didn't come back, and I haven't spoken to him since." She looked at each of them in turn as though some one might be able to help her with the puzzle.

" Somehow you made him do it—you," said Mina Zabriska.

Slowly Cecily's eyes settled on Mina's face ; thus she stood silent for a full minute.

" Yes, I think so. I think I must have somehow." Her voice rose as she asked with a sudden access of agitation : " But what are we to do now ? "

Mina had no thought for that ; it was the thing itself that engrossed her, not the consequences.

" There will, of course, be a good many formalities," said Iver. " Subject to those, I imagine that the—er—question settles itself."

His phrase seemed to give Cecily no enlightenment.

" Settles itself ? " she repeated.

" Subject to formal proof, I mean, and in the absence of opposition from (he hesitated a second)—from Mr Tristram, which can't be anticipated now, you will be put into possession of the estates and the title." He pointed to Harry's letter which was still in her hands. " You see what he himself calls you there, Miss Gainsborough."

She made no answer. With another glance at Neeld, Iver pushed back his chair and rose. Neeld followed his example. They felt that the interview had better end. Duplay did not move, and Cecily stood where she was. She seemed to ask

what was to be done with her ; her desolation was sad, but it had something of the comic in it. She was so obviously lost.

" You might walk down to Blent with Miss Gainsborough, Mina," Iver suggested.

" No," cried the Imp in a passion, leaping up from her chair. " I don't want to have anything to do with her."

Cecily started and her cheeks flushed red as though she had been struck. Iver looked vexed and ashamed.

" It's all her fault that Harry Tristram's—that Harry Tristram's——" The Imp's voice was choked ; she could get no further.

Old Mr Neeld came forward. He took Harry's letter from Cecily and gave it to Mina.

" My dear, my dear ! " he said gently, as he patted her hand. " Read that again."

Mina read, and then scrutinized Cecily keenly.

" Well, I'll walk down with you," she said grudgingly. She came nearer to Cecily. " I wonder what you did ! " she exclaimed, scanning her face. " I must find out what you did ! "

Iver came forward. " I must introduce myself to you, Miss Gainsborough. I live at Blentmouth, and my name is Iver."

" Iver ! " She looked at him curiously. At once he felt that she had knowledge of the relation between his daughter and Harry Tristram.

" Yes, and since we shall probably be neighbours——" He held out his hand. She put hers into it, still with a bewildered air. Neeld contented himself with a bow as he passed her, and Duplay escaped from the room with a rapidity and stillness suggestive of a desire not to be observed. When the men were gone Cecily sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands for a minute. She looked up to find Mina regarding her, still with mingled inquisitiveness and hostility.

" What were you all doing here when I came ? " asked Cecily.

" They were trying to make me tell what I knew about Harry Tristram. But I wouldn't tell."

" Wouldn't you ? " Cecily's eyes sparkled in sudden

approval, and she broke into a smile. " I like you for that," she cried. " I wouldn't have told either."

" But now ! " The Imp pouted disconsolately. " Well, it's not your fault, I suppose, and——" She walked up to Cecily and gave her a brief but friendly kiss. " And you needn't be so upset as all that about it. We'll just talk over what we'd better do."

There was not much prospect of their talk affecting either the laws of England or the determination of Harry Tristram to any appreciable extent. But the proposal seemed to comfort Cecily ; and the Imp rang the bell for tea. Coming back from this task, she gave Cecily a critical glance.

" You'll look it anyhow," she concluded with a reluctant smile.

Meanwhile Iver and Neeld drove back to Blentmouth, Iver said nothing about his friend's bygone treachery ; oddly enough it was not in the culprit's mind either.

" Now, Neeld, to break this news to Janie ! " said Iver.

Neeld nodded once again.

But of course a situation quite other than they expected awaited them at Fairholme.

CHAPTER XVI

The New Life

"YOU haven't mentioned it to the young man himself?" asked Lady Evenswood.

"Certainly not. I've only seen him once, and then he didn't talk of his own affairs. He takes the thing very well. He's lost his position and he's the hero of the newspapers, and he bears both afflictions quite coolly. A lad of good balance, I think."

"Is he agreeable?"

"Hum, I'm not sure of that. No excess of modesty, I fancy."

"I suppose you mean he's not shy? All young men are conceited. I think I should like you to bring him to see me."

For forty years such an intimation from Lady Evenswood had enjoyed the rank of a command; Lord Southend received it with proper obedience.

"The solution I spoke of has occurred to some of us," he went on. "He's poor now, but with that he could make a marriage. The case is very exceptional——"

"So is what you propose, George."

"Oh, there are precedents. It was done in the Bearsdale case."

"There was a doubt there." Lady Evenswood knew all about the Bearsdale case; though it was ancient history to Southend, she had danced with both the parties to it.

"The House was against the marriage unanimously." But he did not deny the doubt.

"Well, what are you going to do?" she asked.

"It would be necessary to approach Disney." Southend spoke with some appearance of timidity. Mr Disney was Prime Minister. "And the truth is, none of us seemed to like the job. So John Fullcombe suggested you."

"What brave men you are!" Her face wrinkled humorously.

" Well, he might bite us, and he couldn't bite you—not so hard anyhow."

" And you want me to ask for a higher rank? That wasn't done in the Bearsdale case, nor in any other that I ever heard of."

" We shouldn't press that. A barony would do. But if Disney thought that under the very exceptional circumstances a viscounty——"

" I don't see why you want it," she persisted. The slight embarrassment in Southend's manner stirred the old lady's curiosity. " It's rather odd to reward a man for his mother's —— There, I don't say a word about Addie. I took her to her first ball, poor girl."

" Disney used to know her as a girl."

" If you're relying on Robert Disney's romantic memories——" But she stopped, adding after a pause, " Well, one never knows. But again, why a viscounty? "

Driven into a corner, but evidently rather ashamed of himself, Southend explained.

" The viscounty would be more convenient if a match came about between him and the girl."

" What, the new Lady Tristram? Well, George, romance has taken possession of you to-day! "

" Not at all," he protested indignantly. " It's the obviously sensible way out."

" Then they can do it without a viscounty."

" Oh, no, not without something. There's the past, you see."

" And a sponge is wanted? And the bigger the sponge the better? And I'm to get my nose bitten off by asking Robert Disney for it? And if by a miracle he said ' yes,' for all I know somebody else might say ' no '! "

This dark reference to the Highest Quarters caused Southend to nod thoughtfully: they discussed the probable attitude —a theme too exalted to be more than mentioned here. " Anyhow the first thing is to sound Disney," continued Southend.

" I'll think about it after I've seen the young man," Lady Evenswood promised. " Have you any reason to suppose he likes his cousin? "

" None at all—except, of course, the way he's cleared out for her."

" Yielding gracefully to necessity, I suppose ? "

" Really, I doubt the necessity ; and, anyhow, the gracefulness needs some explanation in a case like this. Still I always fancied he was going to marry another girl, a daughter of a friend of mine—Iver—you know who I mean ? "

" Oh, yes. Bring Harry Tristram to see me," said she. " Good-bye, George. You're looking very well."

" And you're looking very young."

" Oh, I finished getting old before you were forty."

A thought struck Southend. " You might suggest the viscounty as contingent on the marriage."

" I shan't suggest anything till I've seen the boy—and I won't promise to then."

Later in the afternoon Southend dropped in at the Imperium, where to his surprise and pleasure he found Iver in the smoking-room. Asked how he came to be in town, Iver explained :

" I really ran away from the cackling down at Blentmouth. All our old ladies are talking fifteen to the dozen about Harry Tristram, and Lady Tristram, and me, and my family, and—well, I dare say you're in it by now, Southend ! There's an old cat named Swinkerton, who is positively beyond human endurance ; she waylays me in the street. And Mrs Trumbler, the vicar's wife, comes and talks about Providence to my poor wife every day. So I fled."

" Leaving your wife behind, I suppose ? "

" Oh, she doesn't mind Mrs Trumbler. But I do."

" Well, there's a good deal of cackling up here too. But tell me about the new girl." Lord Southend did not appear to consider his own question ' cackling ' or as tending to produce the same.

" I've only seen her once. She's in absolute seclusion and lets nobody in except Mina Zabriska—a funny little foreign woman—You don't know her."

" I know about her, I saw it in the paper. She had something to do with it ? "

" Yes." Iver passed away from that side of the subject immediately. " And she's struck up a friendship with Cecily

Gainsborough—Lady Tristram, I ought to say. I had a few words with the father. The poor old chap doesn't know whether he's on his head or his heels ; but as they're of about equal value, I should imagine, for thinking purposes, it doesn't much matter. Ah, here's Neeld. He came up with me."

The advent of Neeld produced more discussion. Yet Southend said nothing of the matter which he had brought to Lady Evenswood's attention. Discretion was necessary there. Besides he wished to know how the land lay as to Janie Iver. On that subject his friend preserved silence.

" And the whole thing was actually in old Joe's diary ! " exclaimed Southend.

Neeld, always annoyed at the ' Joe,' admitted that the main facts had been recorded in Mr Cholderton's Journal, and that he himself had known them when nobody else in England did—save, of course, the conspirators themselves.

" And you kept it dark ? I didn't know you were as deep as that, Neeld." He looked at the old gentleman with great amazement.

" Neeld was in an exceedingly difficult position," said Iver. " I've come to see that." He paused, looking at Southend with an amused air. " You introduced us to one another," he reminded him with a smile.

" Bless my soul, so I did ! I'd forgotten. Well, it seems my fate too to be mixed up in the affair." Just at present, however, he was assisting fate rather actively.

" It's everybody's. The Blent's on fire from Mingham to the sea."

" I've seen Harry Tristram."

" Ah, how is he ? " asked Neeld.

" Never saw a young man more composed in all my life. And he couldn't be better satisfied with himself if he turned out to be a duke."

" We know Harry's airs," Iver said, smiling indulgently. " But there's stuff in him." A note of regret came into his voice. " He treated me very badly—I know Neeld won't admit it, but he did. Still, I like him and I'd help him if I could."

" Well, he atoned for anything wrong by owning up in the end," remarked Southend.

"That wasn't for my sake or for——Well, it had nothing to do with us. As far as we were concerned he'd be at Blent to-day. It was Cecily Gainsborough who did it."

"Yes. I wonder——"

Iver rose decisively. "Look here, Southend, if you're going to do exactly what all my friends and neighbours, beginning with Miss Swinkerton, are doing, I shall go and write letters." With a nod he walked into the next room, leaving Neeld alone with his inquisitive friend. Southend lost no time.

"What's happened about Janie Iver? There was some talk——"

"It's all over," whispered Neeld with needless caution. "He released her, and she accepted the release."

"What, on the ground that——?"

"Really I don't know any more. But it's finally over; you may depend upon that."

Southend lit a cigar with a satisfied air. On the whole he was glad to hear the news.

"Staying much longer in town?" he asked.

"No, I'm going down to Iver's again in August."

"You want to see the end of it? Come, I know that's it!" He laughed as he walked away.

Meanwhile Harry Tristram, unconscious of the efforts which were being made to arrange his future, and paying as little attention as he could to the buzz of gossip about his past, had settled down in quiet rooms and was looking at the world from a new point of view. He was in seclusion like his cousin; the mourning they shared for Addie Tristram was sufficient excuse; and he found his chief pleasure in wandering about the streets. The season was not over yet, and he liked to go out about eight in the evening and watch the great city starting forth to enjoy itself. Then he could feel its life and all the rush and the gaiety of it. Somehow now he seemed more part of it and more at home in it than when he used to run up for a few days from his country home. Then Blent had been the centre of his life, and in town he was but a stranger and a sojourner. Blent was gone; and London is home to homeless men. There was a suggestion for him in the air of it, an impulse that was gradually but strongly urging him to

action, telling him that he must begin to do. For the moment he was notorious, but the talk and the staring would be over soon—the sooner the better, he added most sincerely. Then he must do something if he wished still to be, or ever again to be, anybody. Otherwise he could expect no more than to be pointed out now and then to the curious as the man who had once been Tristram of Blent and had ceased to be such in a puzzling manner.

As he looked back, he seemed to himself to have lived hitherto on the banks of the river of life as well as of the river Blent ; there had been no need of swimming. But he was in the current now ; he must swim or sink. This idea took shape as he watched the carriages, the lines of scampering hansoms, the crowds waiting at theatre doors. Every man and every vehicle, every dandy and every urchin, represented some effort, if it were only at one end of the scale to be magnificent, at the other not to be hungry. No such notions had been fostered by days spent on the banks of the Blent. "What shall I do? What shall I do?" The question hummed in his brain as he walked about. There were such infinite varieties of things to do, such a multitude of people doing them. To some men this reflection brings despair or bewilderment ; to Harry (as indeed Lord Southend would have expected from his observation of him) it was a titillating evidence of great opportunities, stirring his mind to a busy consideration of chances. Thus then it seemed as though Blent might fall into the background, his loved Blent. Perhaps his not thinking of it had begun in wilfulness, or even in fear ; but he found the rule he had made far easier to keep than he had ever expected. There had been a sort of release for his mind ; he had not foreseen this as a possible result of his great sacrifice. He even felt rather richer ; which seemed a strange paradox, till he reflected that the owners of Blent had seldom been able to lay hands readily on a fluid sum of fifteen thousand pounds, subject to no claims for houses to be repaired, buildings to be maintained, cottages to be built, wages to be paid, and the dozen other ways in which money disperses itself over the surface of a landed estate. He had fifteen thousand pounds in form as good as cash. He was living more or less as he had once meant to live in this one

particular ; he was living with a respectable if not a big cheque by him, ready for any emergency which might arise—an emergency not now of a danger to be warded off, but of an opportunity to be seized.

These new thoughts suited well with the visit which he paid to Lady Evenswood and gained fresh strength from it. His pride and independence had made him hesitate about going. Southend, amazed yet half admiring, had been obliged to plead, reminding him that it was not merely a woman nor merely a woman of rank who wished to make his acquaintance, but also a very old woman who had known his mother as a child. He further offered his own company, so that the interview might assume a less formal aspect. Harry declined the company but yielded to the plea. He was announced as Mr Tristram. He had just taken steps to obtain a Royal Licence to bear the name. Southend had chuckled again half admiringly over that.

Although the room was in deep shadow and very still, and the old white-haired lady the image of peace, for Harry there too the current ran strong. Though not great, she had known the great ; if she had not done the things, she had seen them done ; her talk revealed a matter-of-course knowledge of secrets, a natural intimacy with the inaccessible. It was like Harry to show no signs of being impressed ; but very shrewd eyes were upon him, and his impassivity met with amused approval since it stopped short of inattention. She broke it down at last by speaking of Addie Tristram.

" The most fascinating creature in the world," she said. " I knew her as a little girl. I knew her up to the time of your birth almost. After that she hardly left Blent, did she ? At least she never came to London. You travelled, I know."

" Were you ever at Blent ? " he asked.

" No, Mr Tristram."

He frowned for a moment ; it was odd not to be able to ask people there, just too as he was awaking to the number of people there were in the world worth asking.

" There never was anybody in the world like her, and there never will be," Lady Evenswood went on.

" I used to think that ; but I was wrong." The smile that Mina Zabriska knew came on his face.

" You were wrong ? Who's like her then ? "

" Her successor. My cousin Cecily's very like her."

Lady Evenswood was more struck by the way he spoke than by the meaning of what he said. She wanted to say " Bravo," and to pat him on the back ; he had avoided so entirely any hesitation or affectation in naming his cousin—Addie Tristram's successor who had superseded him.

" She talks and moves and sits and looks at you in the same way. I was amazed to see it." He had said not a word of this to anybody since he left Blent. Lady Evenswood, studying him very curiously, began to make conjectures about the history of the affair, also about what lay behind her visitor's composed face ; there was a hint of things suppressed in his voice. But he had the bridle on himself again in a moment. " Very curious these likenesses are," he ended with a shrug.

She decided that he was remarkable, for a boy of his age, bred in the country, astonishing. She had heard her father describe Pitt at twenty-one and Byron at eighteen. Without making absurd comparisons, there was, all the same, something of that precocity of manhood here, something also of the arrogance that the great men had exhibited. She was very glad that she had sent for him.

" I don't want to be impertinent," she said (she had not meant to make even this much apology), " but perhaps an old woman may tell you that she is very sorry for—for this turn in your fortunes, Mr Tristram."

" You're very kind. It was all my own doing, you know. Nobody could have touched me."

" But that would have meant——? " she exclaimed, startled into candour.

" Oh, yes, I know. Still—but since things have turned out differently, I needn't trouble you with that."

She saw the truth, seeming to learn it from the set of his jaw. She enjoyed a man who was not afraid to defy things, and she had been heard to lament that everybody had a conscience nowadays—nay, insisted on bringing it even into politics. She wanted to hear more—much more now—about his surrender, and recognized as a new tribute to Harry the fact that she could not question him. Immediately she

conceived the idea of inviting him to dinner to meet Mr Disney ; but of course that must wait for a little while.

" Everything must seem rather strange to you ? " she suggested.

" Yes, very," he answered thoughtfully. " I'm beginning to think that some day I shall look back on my boyhood with downright incredulity. I shan't seem to have been that boy in the least."

" What are you going to do in the meantime to procure that feeling ? " She was getting to the point she wished to arrive at, but very cautiously.

" I don't know yet. It's hard to choose."

" You certainly won't want for friends."

" Yes, that's pleasant, of course." He seemed to hint, however, that he did not regard it as very useful.

" Oh, and serviceable too," she corrected him, with a nod of wise experience. " Jobs are frowned at now, but many great men have started by means of them. Robert Disney himself came in for a pocket-borough."

" Well, I really don't know," he repeated thoughtfully, but with no sign of anxiety or fretting. " There's lots of time, Lady Evenswood."

" Not for me," she said with all her graciousness.

He smiled again, this time cordially, as he rose to take leave. But she detained him.

" You're on friendly terms with your cousin, I suppose ? "

" Certainly, if we meet. Of course I haven't seen her since I left Blent. She's there, you know."

" Have you written to her ? "

" No. I think it's best not to ask her to think of me just now."

She looked at him a moment, seeming to consider.

" Perhaps," she said at last. " But don't overdo that. Don't be cruel."

" Cruel ? " There was strong surprise in his voice and on his face.

" Yes, cruel. Have you ever troubled to think what she may be feeling ? "

" I don't know that I ever have," Harry admitted slowly.

" At first sight it looks as if I were the person who might be supposed to be feeling."

" At first sight, yes. Is that always to be enough for you, Mr Tristram ? If so, I shan't regret so much that I haven't —lots of time."

He stood silent before her for several seconds.

" Yes, I see. Perhaps. I dare say I can find out something about it. After all, I've given some evidence of consideration for her."

" That makes it worse if you give none now. Good-bye."

" It's less than a fortnight since I first met her. She won't miss me much, Lady Evenswood."

" Time's everything, isn't it ? Oh, you're not stupid ! Think it over, Mr Tristram. Now good-bye. And don't conclude I shan't think about you because it's only an hour since we met. We women are curious. When you've nothing better to do it'll pay you to study us."

As Harry walked down from her house in Green Street, his thoughts were divided between the new life and that old one which she had raised again before his eyes by her reference to Cecily. The balance was turned in favour of Blent by the sight of a man who was associated in his mind with it—Sloyd, the house-agent who had let Merrion Lodge to Mina Zabriska. Sloyd was as smart as usual, but he was walking along in a dejected way, and his hat was unfashionably far back on his head. He started when he saw Harry approaching him.

" Why it's——" he began, and stopped in evident hesitation.

" Mr Tristram," said Harry. " Glad to meet you, Mr Sloyd, though you won't have any more rent to hand over to me."

Sloyd began to murmur some rather flowery condolences.

Harry cut him short in a peremptory but good-natured fashion.

" How's business with you ? " he asked.

" Might be worse, Mr Tristram. I don't complain. We're a young firm, and we don't command the opportunities that others do." He laughed as he added : " You couldn't recommend me to a gentleman with ten thousand pounds to spare, could you, Mr Tristram ? "

" I know just the man. What's it for ? "

"No, no. Principals only," said Sloyd with a shake of his head.

"How does one become a principal then? I'll walk your way a bit." Harry lit a cigar; Sloyd became more erect and amended the position of his hat; he hoped that a good many people would recognize Harry. Yet social pride did not interfere with business wariness.

"Are you in earnest, Mr Tristram? It's a safe thing."

"Oh, no, it isn't, or you wouldn't be hunting for ten thousand on the pavement of Berkeley Square."

"I'll trust you," Sloyd declared. Harry nodded thanks, inwardly amused at the obvious effort which attended the concession. "If you don't come in, you'll not give it away?" Again Harry nodded. "It's a big chance, but we haven't got the money to take it, and unless we can take it we shall have to sell our rights. It's an option on land. I secured it, but it's out in a week. Before then we must table twenty thousand. And ten cleans us out."

"What'll happen if you don't?"

"I must sell the option—rather than forfeit it, you know. I've an offer for it, but a starvation one."

"Who from?"

After a moment's scrutiny Sloyd whispered a name of immense significance in such a connexion: "Iver."

"I should like to hear some more about this. It's worth something, I expect, if Iver wants it. Shall I go with you to your office?" He hailed a passing cab. "I've got the money," he said, "and I want to use it. You show me that this is a good thing, and in it goes."

An hour passed in the office of Sloyd, Sloyd & Gurney. Harry Tristram came out whistling. He looked very pleased; his step was alert; he had found something to do, he had made a beginning—good or bad. It looked good: that was enough. He was no longer an idler or merely an onlooker. He had begun to take a hand in the game himself. He found an added, perhaps a boyish, pleasure in the fact that the affair was for the present to be a dead secret. He was against Iver, too, in a certain sense, and that was another spice; not from any ill-will, but because it would please him especially to show Iver that he could hold his own. It occurred to him

that in case of a success he would enjoy going and telling old Lady Evenswood about it. He felt, as he said to himself, very jolly, careless and jolly, more so than he remembered feeling for many months back. Suddenly an idea struck him. Was it in whole or in part because there was no longer anything to hide, because he need no longer be on the watch ? He gave this idea a good deal of rather amused consideration, and came to the conclusion that there might be something in it. He went to the theatre that night, to the pit (where he would not be known), and enjoyed himself immensely.

And Lady Evenswood had made up her mind that she would find a way of seeing Mr Disney soon, and throw out a cautious feeler. Everything would have to be done very carefully, especially if the marriage with the cousin were to be made a feature of the case. But her resolve, although not altered, was hampered by a curious feeling to which her talk with Harry had given rise. There was now not only the very grave question whether Robert Disney—to say nothing of Somebody Else—would entertain the idea. There was another, a much less obvious one—whether Harry himself would welcome it. And a third—whether she herself would welcome it for him. However, when Southend next called on her, she professed her readiness to attack or at least to reconnoitre the task from which he and John Fullcombe and the rest had shrunk.

" Only," she said, " if I were you, I should find out tolerably early—as soon as we know that there's any chance at all —what Mr Tristram himself thinks about it."

" There's only one thing he could think ! " exclaimed Southend.

" Oh, very well," smiled Lady Evenswood.

A long life had taught her that only facts convince, and that they often fail.

CHAPTER XVII

River Scenes and Bric-à-Brac

THE BLENT was on fire indeed, and Mina Zabriska occupied a position rich in importance, prolific of pleasure. Others, such as Iver and Miss S., might meet Mr Gainsborough as he took timid rambles ; they could extort little beyond a dazed civility. Others again, such as Janie Iver and Bob Broadley, might comfort themselves with the possession of a secret and the conviction that they too could produce a fair sensation when the appropriate (and respectable) time arrived ; for the present they commanded no public interest. Others again, the Major notably, strove after importance by airs of previous knowledge and hints of undisclosed details. Even Mrs Trumbler made her cast, declaring that she had always known (the source of the information was left in obscurity) that pride such as Harry Tristram's was the sure precursor of a fall. None of them could compete with Mina Zabriska. To her alone the doors of Blent were open ; she held exclusive right of access to its hidden mistress. The fact caused unmeasured indignation ; the reason excited unresting curiosity. This state of things ought to have made Mina very happy. What more could woman want ?

One thing only, but that a necessity—somebody to talk to about it. She had nobody. Janie showed no desire to discuss Blent or anything or anybody connected therewith, and with Janie out of the question there was nobody to whom loyalty allowed her to talk. The Major, for instance, was one of the enemy. She might pity him as an uncle—he was perplexed and surly because somehow he never happened to meet Miss Iver now—but she could not confide in him. The gossips of Blentmouth were beneath her lordly notice. She was bubbling over with undiscussed impressions. And now even Mr Neeld had gone off on a visit to town !

Yet things needed talking about, hammering out, the light of another mind thrown upon them ; for they were very

difficult. There was no need to take account of Mr Gainsborough ; as long as he could be kept in the library and out of the one curiosity-shop which was to be found in Blentmouth, he could not do himself or the house much harm. He was still bewildered, but by no means unhappy, and he talked constantly of going back to town to see about everything—to-morrow. There was nothing to see about—the lawyers had done it all—and he was no more necessary or important in London than he was at Blent. But Cecily's case was another matter altogether, and it was about her that Mina desired the enlightening contact of mind with mind, in order to canvass and explain the incongruities of a behaviour which conformed to no rational or consistent theory.

Cecily had acquiesced in all the lawyers did, had signed papers at request, had allowed herself to be invested with the property, saluted with the title, enthroned in the fullest manner. So far then she had accepted her cousin's sacrifice and the transformation of her own life. Yet through and in spite of all this she maintained, even to the extreme of punctiliousness, the air of being a visitor at Blent. She was not exactly apologetic to the servants, but she thanked them profusely for any special personal service they might perform for her ; she made no changes in the order of the household ; when Mina—always busy in her friend's interest—suggested rearrangement of furniture or of curios, Cecily's manner implied that she was prepared to take no such liberties in another man's house. It would have been all very well-bred if Harry had put his house at her disposal for a fortnight. Seeing that the place was her own and that she had accepted it as being her own, Mina declared that her conduct was little less than an absurdity. This assertion was limited to Mina's own mind ; it had not been made to the offender herself. The fear she had felt of Harry threatened to spread to his successor ; she did not feel equal to a remonstrance. But she grew gradually into a state of extreme irritation and impatience. This provisional, this ostentatiously provisional, attitude could not be maintained permanently. Something must happen one way or the other. Now what was it to be ? She could not pretend to guess. These Tristrams were odd folk. There was the same blood in Cecily as had run in Addie Tristram's veins. On the other

hand the Gainsboroughs seemed to have been ordinary. Was this period of indecision or of suspended action a time of struggle between the Tristram in Cecily and the Gainsborough? Mina, on the look-out for entertainment, had no doubt which of the two she wished to be victorious; the Gainsborough promised nothing, the Tristram—well—effects! The strain made Mina excited, restless, and at times exceedingly short with Major Duplay.

The neighbourhood waited too, but for the end of Lady Tristram's mourning, not of her indecision. As a result of much discussion, based on many rumours and an incredible number of authentic reports, it was settled that at the end of six months Blent was to be thrown open, visitors received, and a big house-warming given. A new era was to begin. Splendour and respectability were to lie down together. Blent was to pay a new homage to the proprieties. Miss Swinkerton was strongly of opinion that bygones should be allowed to be bygones, and was author of a theory which found much acceptance among the villas—namely, that Lady Tristram would consider any reference to her immediate predecessor as inconsiderate, indeed indelicate, and not such as might be expected to proceed from ladylike mouths.

"We must remember that she's a girl, my dear," Miss S. observed to Mrs Trumbler.

"She must know about it," Mrs Trumbler suggested. "But I dare say you're right, Miss Swinkerton."

"If such a thing had happened in my family, I should consider myself personally affronted by any reference to the persons concerned."

"The Vicar says he's sadly afraid that the notions of the upper classes on such subjects are very lax."

"Not at all," said Miss S. tartly. Really she needed no instruction from the Vicar. "And as I say, my dear, she's a girl. The ball will mark a new departure. I said so to Madame Zabriska and she quite agreed with me."

Mrs Trumbler frowned pensively. "I suppose Madame Zabriska has been a widow some time?" she remarked.

"I have never inquired," said Miss S. with an air of expecting applause for a rare discretion.

" I wonder what Mr Harry will do ! The Vicar says he must be terribly upset."

" Oh, I never professed to understand that young man. All I know is that he's going abroad."

" Abroad ? "

" Yes, my dear. I heard it in the town, and Madame Zabriska said she had no doubt it was correct."

" But surely Madame Zabriska doesn't correspond——? "

" I don't know, my dear. I know what she said." She looked at Mrs Trumbler and went on with emphasis ; " It doesn't do to judge foreigners as we should judge ourselves. If I corresponded with Mr Tristram it would be one thing ; if Madame Zabriska—and to be sure she has nobody to look after her ; that Major is no better than any silly young man—chooses to do so, it's quite another. All I say is that, so far as Blent is concerned, there's an end of Mr Tristram. Why, he hasn't got a penny piece, my dear."

" So I heard," agreed Mrs Trumbler. " I suppose they won't let him starve."

" Oh, arrangements are made in such cases," nodded Miss S. " But of course nothing is said about them. For my part I shall never mention either Mr Tristram or the late Lady Tristram to her present ladyship."

Mrs Trumbler was silent for a while ; at last her mouth spoke the thoughts of her heart.

" I suppose she'll be thinking of marrying soon. But I don't know anybody in the neighbourhood——"

" My dear, she'll have her house in town in the season. The only reason the late Lady Tristram didn't do so was——Well, you can see that for yourself, Mrs Trumbler ! "

" What must the Ivers think about it ! What an escape ! How providential ! "

" Let us hope it'll be a lesson to Janie. If I had allowed myself to think of position or wealth, I should have been married half a dozen times, Mrs Trumbler."

" I dare say you would," said faithful Mrs Trumbler. But this assent did not prevent her from remarking to the Vicar that Miss S. sometimes talked of things which no unmarried woman could be expected really to understand.

It will be observed that the Imp had been alleviating the

pangs of her own perplexity by a dexterous ministering to the delusions of others. Not for the world would she have contradicted Miss S.'s assertions ; she would as soon have thought of giving that lady a plain and unvarnished account of the late Monsieur Zabriska's very ordinary and quite reputable life and death. No doubt she was right. Both she and the neighbourhood had to wait, and her efforts did something to make the period more bearable for both of them. The only sufferer was poor Mr Gainsborough, who was driven from Blentmouth and the curiosity-shop by the sheer terror of encountering ladies from villas who told him all about what his daughter was going to do.

The outbreak came, and in a fashion as Tristramesque as Mina could desire, for all that the harbinger of it was frightened little Mr Gainsborough, more frightened still. He came up the hill one evening about six, praying Mina's immediate presence at Blent. Something had happened, he explained, as they walked down. Cecily had had a letter—from somebody in London. No, not Harry. She must see Mina at once. That was all he knew, except that his daughter was perturbed and excited. His manner protested against the whole thing with a mild despair.

" Quick, quick ! " cried the Imp, almost making him run to keep up with her impatient strides.

Cecily was in her room—the room that had been Addie Tristram's.

" You've moved in here ! " was Mina's first exclamation.

" Yes ; the housekeeper said I must, so I did. But——" She glanced up for a moment at Addie's picture and broke off. Then she held up a letter which she had in her hand. " Do you know anything of Lord Southend ? " she asked.

" I've heard Mr Iver and Mr Neeld speak of him. That's all."

" He writes to say he knew Lady Tristram and—and Harry, and hopes he'll know me soon."

" That's very friendly," Mina thought, but did not add, that it was rather unimportant.

" Yes, but it's more than that. Don't you see ? It's an opening." She looked at her friend, impatient at her want of comprehension. " It makes it possible to do something. I can begin now."

" Begin what ? " Mina was enjoying her own bewilderment keenly.

" How long did you think I could stand it ? I'm not made of—of—of soap ! You know Harry ! You liked him, didn't you ? And you knew Lady Tristram ! I've slept in this room two nights and——"

" You haven't seen a ghost ? "

" Ghost ! Oh, don't be silly. I've lain here awake, looking at that picture. And it's looked at me—at least it seemed to. ' What are you doing here ? ' That's what it's been saying. ' What are you doing here ? ' No, I'm not mad. That's what I was saying myself. But the picture seemed to say it."

There was a most satisfactory absence of Gainsborough about all this.

" Then I go into the Long Gallery ! It's no better there ! " Her hands were flung out despairingly.

" You seemed to have settled down so well," murmured Mina.

" Settled down ! What was there to do ? Oh, you know I hadn't ! I can't bear it, Mina, and I won't. Isn't it hard ? I should have loved it all so, if it had been really mine, if it had come to me properly. And now—it's worse than nothing ! " She sat back in her chair with her face set in a desperate unhappiness.

" It is yours ; it did come to you properly," Mina protested. Her sympathy tended always toward the person she was with, her sensitive mind responding to the immediate appeal. She thought more of Cecily now than of Harry, who was somewhere —vaguely somewhere—in London.

" You say that ? " cried Cecily angrily. " You, Harry's friend ! You, who fought and lied—yes, lied for him. Why did you do all that if you think it's properly mine ? How can I face that picture and say it's mine ? It's a detestable injustice. Ah, and I did—I did love it so."

" Well, I don't see what you're to do. You can't give it back to Mr Tristram. At least I shouldn't like to propose that to him, and I'm sure he wouldn't take it. Why, he couldn't, Cecily ! "

Cecily rose and walked restlessly to the window.

" No, no, no," she said fretfully. She turned abruptly

round to Mina. "Lord Southend says he'd be glad to make my acquaintance and have a talk."

"Ask him down here then."

"Ask him here? I'm not going to ask people to stay here."

"I think that's rather absurd." Mina had needed to summon up courage for this remark.

"And he says—— There, look at this letter. He says he's seen Harry and hopes to be able to do something for him. What does he mean by that?" She came back toward Mina. "There must be something possible if he says that."

"He can't mean anything about—about Blent. He means——"

"I must find out what he means. I must see him. The letter came when I was just desperate. Father and I sitting down here together day after day! As if——! As if——!" She paused and struggled for self-control. "There, I'm going to be quite calm and reasonable about it," she ended.

Mina had her doubts about that—and would have been sorry not to have them. The interest that had threatened to vanish from her life with Addie Tristram's death and Harry's departure was revived. She sat looking at the agitated girl in a pleasant suspense. Cecily took up Southend's letter again and smoothed it thoughtfully. "What should you think Harry must feel about me?" she asked, with a nearer approach to the calm which she had promised; but it seemed the quiet of despair.

Here Mina had her theory ready and advanced it with confidence.

"I expect he hates you. You see he did what he did in a moment of excitement: he must have been wrought up by something—something quite unusual with him. You brought it about somehow."

"Yes, I know I did. Do you suppose I haven't thought about that?"

"There's sure to have been a reaction," pursued the sage Imp. "He'll have got back to his ordinary state of mind, and in that he loved Blent above everything. And the more he loves Blent, and the sorrier he is for having given it up, the less he'll like you, of course."

"You think he's sorry?"

" When I've done anything on an impulse like that, I'm always sorry." Mina spoke from a tolerably large experience of impulses and their results ; a very recent example had been the impulse of temper which made her drop hints to the Major about Harry's right to be Tristram of Blent.

" Yes, then he would hate me," Cecily concluded. " And how she'd hate me ! " she cried the next instant, pointing at Addie Tristram's picture.

About that at least there was no doubt in Mina's mind. She nodded emphatically.

" I've done what she spent her life trying to prevent ! I've made everybody talk about her again ! Mina, I feel as if I'd thrown mud at her, as if I'd reviled her. And she can't know how I would have loved her ! "

" I remember her when she thought her husband was dead and that she could be married all right to Captain Fitzhubert and—and that it would be all right, you know."

" What did she say ? " Cecily's eyes were on the picture.

" She cried out : ' Think of the difference it makes—the enormous difference ! ' I didn't know what she meant then, but I remember how she looked and how she spoke."

" And in the end there is—no difference ! Yes, she'd hate me. And so must Harry." She turned to Mina. " It's terribly unfair, isn't it, terribly ? She'd have liked me, I think, and I'd got to be such good friends with him. I'd come to think he'd ask us down now and then—about once a year perhaps. It would have been something to look forward to all the year. It would have made life quite different, quite good enough, you know. I should have been so content and so happy with that. Oh, it's terribly unfair ! Why do people do things that—that bring about things like this ? "

" Poor Lady Tristram," sighed Mina, glancing at the beautiful cause of the terrible unfairness. " She was like that, you see," she added.

" Yes, I know that. But it oughtn't to count against other people so. Yes, it's terribly unfair."

These criticisms on the order of the world, whether well-founded or not (to Mina they seemed to possess much plausibility), did not advance matters. A silence fell between

the two, and Cecily walked again to the window. The sun was setting on Blent, and it glowed in a soft beauty.

" To think that I should be here, and have this, and yet be very very unhappy ! " murmured the girl softly. She faced round suddenly. " Mina, I'm going to London. Now—to-night. There's a train at eight."

The Imp sat up straight and stared.

" I shall wire to our house ; the maid's there, and she'll have things ready."

" What are you going to town for ? "

" To see this Lord Southend. You must come with me."

" I ? Oh, I can't possibly. And your father——? "

" He must stay here. You must come. Run back and pack a bag ; you won't want much. I shall go just as I am." With a gesture she indicated the plain black frock she wore. " Oh, I can't be bothered with packing ! What does that matter ? I'll call for you in the carriage at seven. We mustn't miss the train."

Mina gasped. This was Tristram indeed ; the wild resolve was announced in tones calmer than any that Cecily had achieved during the interview. Mina began to think that all the family must have this way of being peculiar in ordinary things, but quite at home when there was an opportunity of doing anything unusual.

" I just feel I must go. If anything's done at all, it'll be done in London, not here."

" How long do you mean to stay ? "

" I can't possibly tell. Till something's done. Go now, Mina, or you'll be late."

" Oh, I'm not coming. The whole thing's absurd. What can you do ? And, anyhow, it's not my business."

" Very well. I shall go alone. Only I thought you were interested in Harry and—and I thought you were my friend." She threw herself into a chair ; she was in Addie Tristram's attitude. " But I suppose I haven't got any friends," she concluded, not in a distressed fashion, but with a pensive submissive little smile.

" You're perfectly adorable," cried Mina, running across to her. " And I'll go with you to Jericho, if you like." She caught Cecily's hands in hers and kissed her cheek.

The scene was transformed in an instant ; that also was the Tristram way. Cecily sprang up laughing gaily, even dancing a step or two, as she wrung Mina's hands.

" Hurrah ! *Marchons ! En avant !* " she cried. " Oh, we'll do something, Mina ! Don't you hate sitting still ? "

" Cecily, are you—are you in love with Harry ? "

" Oh, I hope not, I hope not," she laughed softly. " Because he must hate me so. And are you, Mina ? Oh, I hope not that too ! Come, to London ! To seek our fortunes in London ! Oh, you tiresome old Blent, how glad I am to leave you ! "

" But your father——"

" We'll do things quite nicely, Mina dear. We won't distress father. We'll leave a note for him. Mina, I'm sure Addie Tristram used just to leave a note whenever she ran away ! We'll sleep in London to-night ! "

Suddenly Mina understood better why Harry had surrendered Blent, and understood too, as her mind flew back, why Addie Tristram had made men do what they had done. She was carried away by this sudden flood of enraptured resolution, of a resolve that seemed like an inspiration, of delight in the unreasonable, of gay defiance to the limits of the possible.

" Oh, yes, you tiresome old Blent ! " cried Cecily, shaking her fair hair toward the open window. " How could a girl think she was going to live on river scenes and *bric-à-brac* ? " She laughed in airy scorn. " You must grow more amusing if I'm to come back to you ! " she threatened.

River scenes and *bric-à-brac* ! Mina was surprised that Blent did not on the instant punish the blasphemy by a revengeful earthquake or an overwhelming flood. Cecily caught her by the arm, a burlesque apprehension screwing her face up into a fantastically ugly mask.

" It was the Gainsborough in me ! " she whispered, " Gainsboroughs can live on curios ! But I can't, Mina, I can't. I'm a Tristram, not a Gainsborough. No more could Harry in the end, no more could Harry ! "

Mina was panting ; she had danced and she had wondered ; she was on the tip of the excitement with which Cecily had infected her.

" But what are we going to do ? " she cried in a last protest of common-sense.

" Oh, I don't know, but something—something—something," was the not very common-sense answer she received.

It was not the moment for common-sense. Mina scorned the thing and flung it from her. She would have none of it—she who stood between beautiful Addie there on the wall and laughing Cecily here in the window, feeling by a strange and welcome illusion that though there were two visible shapes, there was but one heart, one spirit in the two. Almost it seemed as though Addie had risen to life again, once more to charm and to defy the world. An inexplicable impulse made her exclaim :

" Were you like this before you came to Blent ? "

A sudden quiet fell on Cecily. She paused before she answered :

" No, not till I came to Blent." With a laugh she fell on her knees. " Please forgive me what I said about the river and the *bric-à-brac*, dear darling Blent ! "

CHAPTER XVIII

Conspirators and a Crux

LORD SOUTHEND was devoted to his wife—a state of feeling natural often, creditable always. Yet the reason people gave for it—and gave with something like an explicit sanction from him—was not a very exalted one. Susanna made him so exceedingly comfortable. She was born to manage an hotel and cause it to pay fifteen per cent. Being a person—not of social importance, nothing could make her that—but of social rank, she was forced to restrict her genius to a couple of private houses. The result was like the light of the lamps in the heroine's boudoir, a soft brilliancy : in whose glamour Susanna's plain face and limited intellectual interests were lost to view. She was also a particularly good woman ; but her husband knew better than to talk about that.

Behold him after the most perfect of lunches, his armchair in exactly the right spot, his papers by him, his cigars to his hand (even these Susanna understood), a sense of peace in his heart, and in his head a mild wonder that anybody was discontented with the world. In this condition he intended to spend at least a couple of hours ; after which Susanna would drive him gently once round the Park, take him to the House of Lords, wait twenty minutes, and then land him at the Imperium. He lit a cigar and took up the *Economist* ; it was not the moment for anything exciting.

" A lady to see you, my lord—on important business."

Excessive comfort is enervating. After a brief and futile resistance he found Mina Zabriska in the room, and himself regarding her with mingled consternation and amusement. Relics of excitement hung about the Imp, but they were converted to business purposes. She came as an agent. The name of her principal awoke Southend's immediate interest.

" She's come up to London ? " he exclaimed.

" Yes, both of us. We're at their old home."

Southend discovered his *pince-nez* and studied her thin mobile little face.

" And what have you come up for ? " he asked after a pause.

Mina shrugged her shoulders. " Just to see what's going on," she said. " I dare say you wonder what I've got to do with it ? " His manner seemed to assent, and she indicated her position briefly.

" Oh, that's it, is it ? You knew the late Lady Tristram. And you knew——" Again he regarded her thoughtfully. " I hope Lady Tristram—the new one—is well ? "

There was the sound of a whispered consultation outside the door ; it drew Mina's eyes in that direction.

" That's all right," he smiled. " It's only my wife scolding the butler for having let you in. This is my time for rest."

" Rest ! " exclaimed Mina rather scornfully. " You wrote to Cecily as if you could do something."

" That was rash of me. What do you want done ? I've heard about you from Iver, you know."

" Oh, the Ivers have nothing to do with this. It's just between Cecily and Mr Tristram."

" And you and me, apparently."

" What was your idea when you wrote ? I made Cecily let me come and see you because it sounded as if you had an idea." If he had no idea, it was clear that contempt awaited him.

" I wanted to be friendly. But as for doing anything—well, that hardly depends on me."

" But things can't go on as they are, you know," she said brusquely.

" Unhappily, as I understand the law——"

" Oh, I understand the law too—and very silly it is. I suppose it can't be changed ? "

" Good gracious, my dear Madame Zabriska ! Changed ! " And on this point too ! *Nolumus leges Angliae*—— He just stopped himself from the quotation.

" What are Acts of Parliament for ? " Mina demanded.

" Absolutely out of the question," he laughed. " Even if everybody consented, absolutely."

" And Harry Tristram wouldn't consent, you mean ? "

" Well, could any man ? "

Mina looked round the room with a discontented air ; there

is such a lamentable gulf between feeling that something must be done and discovering what it is.

" I don't say positively that nothing can be done " he resumed after a moment, dangling his glass and looking at her covertly. " Are you at leisure this afternoon ? "

" If you've got anything to suggest." Mina had grown distrustful of his intelligence, and her tone showed it.

" I thought you might like to come and see a friend of mine, who is kind enough to be interested in Harry Tristram." He added, with the consciousness of naming an important person : " I mean Lady Evenswood."

" Who's she ? " asked the Imp curtly.

To do them justice, Englishmen seldom forget that allowances must be made for foreigners. Lord Southend explained gravely and patiently.

" Well, let's go," said Mina indifferently. " Not that it seems much use," her manner added.

" Excuse me a moment," said he, and he went out to soothe his wife's alarm and assure her that he was not tired.

As they drove, Mina heard more of Lady Evenswood—among other things, that she had known Addie Tristram as a child ; this fact impressed the Imp beyond all the rest. But Lady Evenswood herself made a greater impression still. An unusual timidity assaulted and conquered Mina when she found herself with the white-haired old lady who never seemed to do more than gently suggest and yet exercised command. Southend watched them together with keen amusement, while Lady Evenswood drew out of Mina some account of Cecily's feelings and of the scene at Blent.

" Well, that's Tristram all over," sighed Lady Evenswood at the end.

" Yes, isn't it ? " cried Mina, emboldened by a sympathy that spoke her own thought. " She hates to feel she's taken everything away from him. But Lord Southend says he can't have it back."

" Oh, no, no, my dear. Still——" She glanced at Southend, doubtful whether to mention their scheme.

He shook his head slightly.

" I dare say Lady Tristram was momentarily excited," he remarked to Mina, " and I think too that she exaggerates what

Harry feels. As far as I've seen him, he's by no means miserable."

"Well, she is anyhow," said Mina. "And you won't convince her that he isn't." She turned to Lady Evenswood. "Is there nothing to be done? You see it's all being wasted."

"All being wasted?"

"Yes, Blent and all of it. He can't have it; and as things are now she can't enjoy it."

"Very perverse, very perverse, certainly," murmured Southend, frowning—although he was rather amused too.

"With an obvious solution," said Lady Evenswood, "if only we lived in the realms of romance."

"I have suggested a magician," put in Southend. "Though he doesn't look much like one," he added with a laugh.

Mina did not understand his remark, but she caught Lady Evenswood's meaning.

"Yes," she said, "but Harry wouldn't do that either."

"He doesn't like his cousin?"

"Yes, I think so." She smiled as she added: "And even if he didn't that mightn't matter."

The other two exchanged glances as they listened. Mina, inspired by a subject that never failed to rouse her, gained courage.

"Any more than it mattered with Miss Iver," she pursued. "And he might just as likely have given Blent to Cecily in that way as in the way he actually did—if she'd wanted it very much and—and it had been a splendid thing for him to do."

Lady Evenswood nodded gently. Southend raised his brows in a sort of protest against this relentless analysis.

"Because that sort of thing would have appealed to him. But he'd never take it from her; he wouldn't even if he was in love with her." She addressed Lady Evenswood especially. "You understand that?" she asked. "He wouldn't be indebted to her. He'd hate her for that."

"Not very amiable," commented Southend.

"Amiable? No!" Amiability seemed at a discount with the Imp.

"You know him very well, my dear?"

"Yes, I—I came to." Mina paused, and suddenly blushed at the remembrance of an idea that had once been suggested

to her by Major Duplay. " And I'm very fond of her," she added.

" In the deadlock," said Southend, " I think you'll have to try my prescription, Lady Evenswood."

" You think that would be of use ? "

" It would pacify this pride of Master Harry's perhaps."

Mina looked from one to the other.

" Do you mean there's anything possible ? " she asked.

" My dear, you're a very good friend."

" I'm not very happy. I don't know what in the world Cecily will do. And yet——" Mina struggled with her rival impulses of kindness and curiosity. " It's all awfully interesting," she concluded, breaking into a smile she could not resist.

" That's the only excuse for all of us, I suppose," sighed Lady Evenswood.

" Not that I like the boy particularly," added Southend.

" Is there anything ? " asked Mina. The appeal was to the lady, not to Southend. But he answered chaffingly :

" Possibly—just possibly—the resources of the Constitution——"

The bell of the front-door sounded audibly in the morning-room in which they were.

" I dare say that's Robert," remarked Lady Evenswood. " He said he might call."

" Oh, by Jove ! " exclaimed Southend with a laugh that sounded a trifle uneasy.

The door opened, and a man came in unannounced. He was of middle height, with large features, thick coarse hair, and a rather ragged beard ; his arms were long and his hands large.

" How are you, Cousin Sylvia ? " he said, crossing to Lady Evenswood, who gave him her hand without rising. " How are you, Southend ? " He turned back to Lady Evenswood. " I thought you were alone."

He spoke in brusque tones, and he looked at Mina as if he did not know what she might be doing there. His appearance seemed vaguely familiar to her.

" We are holding a little conference, Robert. This young lady is very interested in Harry Tristram and his affair. Come now, you remember about it ! Madame Zabriska, this is Mr Disney."

" Mr Disney ! " The Imp gasped. " You mean——? "

The other two smiled. Mr Disney scowled a little. Obviously he had hoped to find his relative alone.

" Madame Zabriska met Addie Tristram years ago at Heidelberg, Robert ; and she's been staying down at Blent—at Merrion Lodge, didn't you say, my dear ? "

Mr Disney had sat down.

" Well, what's the young fellow like ? " he asked.

" Oh, I—I don't know," murmured the Imp in forlorn shyness. This man was—was actually—the—the Prime Minister ! Matters would have been rather better if he had consented to look just a little like it. As it was, her head was in a whirl. Lady Evenswood called him ' Robert ' too ! Nothing about Lady Evenswood had impressed her as much as that, not even the early acquaintance with Addie Tristram.

" Well, then, what's the girl like ? " asked Disney.

" Robert, don't frighten Madame Zabriska."

" Frighten her ? What do you mean ? "

" Oh, tell him what I mean, George," laughed Lady Evenswood, turning to Southend. Mr Disney seemed genuinely resentful at the idea that he might frighten anybody.

" Are you a member of the conference too, Southend ? "

" Well, yes, I—I'm interested in the family." He telegraphed a glance of caution to the old lady ; he meant to convey that the present was not a happy moment to broach the matter that was in their minds.

" I'm sorry I interrupted. Can you give me five minutes in another room, Cousin Sylvia ? " He rose and waited for her.

" Oh, but can't you do anything ? " blurted out the Imp suddenly.

" Eh ? " His eyes under their heavy brows were fixed on her now. There was a deep-lying twinkle in them, although he still frowned ferociously. " Do what ? "

" Why, something for—for Harry Tristram ? "

He looked round at each of them. The twinkle was gone ; the frown was not.

" Oh, was that the conference ? " he asked slowly. " Well, what has the conference decided ? " It was Mina whom he questioned, for which Southend at least was profoundly

thankful. "He'd have bitten my head off, if the women hadn't been there," he confided to Iver afterward.

Mr Disney slowly sat down again. Mina did not perceive the significance of this action, but Lady Evenswood did.

"It's such an extraordinary case, Robert. So very exceptional! Poor Addie Tristram! You remember her?"

"Yes, I remember Addie Tristram," he muttered—'growled,' Mina described it afterward. "Well, what do you want?" he asked.

Lady Evenswood was a woman of tact.

"Really," she said, "it can't be done in this way, of course. If anything is to come before you, it must come before you regularly. I know that, Robert."

The Imp had no tact.

"Oh, no," she cried. "Do listen now, Mr Disney. Do promise to help us now!"

Tact is not always the best thing in the world.

"If you'll tell me in two words, I'll listen," said Mr Disney.

"I—I can't do that. In two words? Oh, but please——"

He had turned away from her to Southend.

"Now then, Southend?"

Lord Southend felt that he must be courageous. After all the women were there.

"In two words? Literally?"

Disney nodded, smiling grimly at Mina's clasped hands and imploring face.

"Literally—if you can." There was a gratuitous implication that Southend and the rest of the world were apt to be loquacious.

"Well, then," said Southend, "I will. What we want is——" After one glance at Lady Evenswood, he got it out. "What we want is—a viscounty."

For a moment Mr Disney sat still. Then again he rose slowly.

"Have I stumbled into Bedlam?" he asked.

"It was done in the Bearsdale case," suggested Lady Evenswood. "Of course there was a doubt there——"

"Anyhow a barony—but a viscounty would be more convenient," murmured Southend.

Mina was puzzled. These mysteries were beyond her.

She had never heard of the Bearsdale case, and she did not understand why—in certain circumstances—a viscounty would be more convenient. But she knew that something was being urged which might meet the difficulty, and she kept eager eyes on Mr Disney. Perhaps she would have done that anyhow ; men who rule heads and hearts can surely draw eyes also. Yet at the moment he was not inspiring. He listened with a smile (was it not rather a grin ?) of sardonic ridicule.

" You made me speak, you know," said Southend. " I'd rather have waited till we got the thing into shape."

" And I should like you to see the boy, Robert."

" Bedlam ! " said Mr Disney with savage conviction. " I'll talk to you about what I came to say another day, Cousin Sylvia. Really to-day——? " With a vague awkward wave of his arm he started for the door.

" You will try ? " cried the Imp, darting at him.

She heard him say, half under his breath, " Damned persistent little woman ! " before he vanished through the door. She turned to her companions, her face aghast, her lips quivering, her eyes dim. The magician had come and gone and worked no spell ; her disappointment was very bitter.

To her amazement Southend was radiant and Lady Evenswood wore an air of gratified contentment. She stared at them.

" It went off better than I expected," said he.

" It must be one of Robert's good days," said she.

" But—but——" gasped the Imp.

" He was very civil for him. He must mean to think about it, about something of the sort anyhow," Southend explained. " I shouldn't wonder if it had been in his mind," he added to Lady Evenswood.

" Neither should I. At any rate he took it splendidly. I almost wish we'd spoken of the marriage."

" Couldn't you write to him ? "

" He wouldn't read it, George."

" Telegraph then ! "

" It would really be worth trying—considering how he took it." Lady Evenswood did not seem able to get over the Prime Minister's extraordinary affability.

" Well, if he treats you like that—great people like you—and

you're pleased, thank goodness I never met him alone!" Mina was not shy with them any more; she had suffered worse.

They glanced at one another.

"It was you, my dear. He'd have been more difficult with us," said Lady Evenswood.

"You interested him," Southend assured her.

"Yes, if anything's been done, you've done it."

They seemed quite sincere. That feeling of being on her head instead of her heels came over Mina again.

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he sent for Harry."

"No, nor if he arranged to meet Cecily Gainsborough—Cecily Tristram, I mean."

"I thought he looked—well, as if he was hit—when you mentioned Addie."

"Oh, there's really no telling with Robert. It went off very well indeed. What a lucky thing he came!"

Still bewildered, Mina began, all the same, to assimilate this atmosphere of contentment and congratulation.

"Do you really think I—I had anything to do with it?" she asked, a new pride swelling in her heart.

"Yes, yes, you attracted his attention."

"He was amused at you, my dear."

"Then I'm glad." She meant that her sufferings would perhaps not go unrecompensed.

"You must bring Lady Tristram to see me," said Lady Evenswood.

"Cecily? Oh—well, I'll try."

Lady Evenswood smiled and Southend laughed outright. It was not quite the way in which Lady Evenswood's invitations were generally received. But neither of them liked Mina less.

It was something to go back to the tiny house between the King's and Fulham Road with the record of such adventures as these. Cecily was there, languid and weary; she had spent the whole day in that hammock in the strip of garden in which Sloyd had found her once. Despondency had succeeded to her excitement—this was all quite in the Tristram way—and she had expected no fruit from Mina's expedition. But Mina

came home, not indeed with anything very definite, yet laden with a whole pack of possibilities. She put that point about the viscounty, which puzzled her, first of all. It alone was enough to fire Cecily to animation. Then she led up, through Lady Evenswood, to Mr Disney himself, confessing, however, that she took the encouragement which that great man had given on faith from those who knew him better than she did. Her own impression would have been that he meant to dismiss the whole thing as impossible nonsense.

" Still I can't help thinking we've done something," she ended in triumph.

" Mina, are you working for him or for me ? "

This question faced Mina with a latent problem which she had hitherto avoided. And now she could not solve it. For some time back she had been familiarized with the fact that her life was dull when Harry Tristram passed out of it. The accepted explanation of that state of feeling was simple enough. But then it would involve Cecily in her turn passing out of view, or at least becoming entirely insignificant. And Mina was not prepared for that. She tried hard to read the answer, regarding Cecily earnestly the while.

" Mayn't I work for both of you ? " she asked at last.

" Well, I can't see why you should do that," said Cecily, rolling out of the hammock and fretfully smoothing her hair.

" I'm a busy-body. That's it," said Mina.

" You know what'll happen if he finds it out ? Harry, I mean. He'll be furious with both of us."

Mina reflected. " Yes, I suppose he will," she admitted. But the spirit of self-sacrifice was on her, perhaps also that of adventure. " I don't care," she said, " as long as I can help."

There was a loud knock at the door. Mina rushed into the front room and saw a man in uniform delivering a letter. The next moment the maid brought it to her—a long envelope with " First Lord of the Treasury " stamped on the lower left-hand corner. She noticed that it was addressed to Lady Evenswood's house, and must have been sent on post-haste. She tore it open. It was headed " Private and Confidential."

" Madame.—I am directed by Mr Disney to request you to state in writing, for his consideration, any facts which may

be within your knowledge as to the circumstances attendant on the marriage of the late Lady Tristram of Blent, and the birth of her son Mr Henry Austen Fitzhubert Tristram. I am to add that your communication will be considered confidential.—I am, Madame, Yours faithfully,

" BROADSTAIRS.

" MADAME ZABRISKA."

" Cecily, Cecily, Cecily ! " Mina darted back and thrust this wonderful document into Cecily's hands. " He does mean something, you see, he will do something ! " she cried. " Oh, who's Broadstairs, I wonder."

Cecily took the letter and read. The Imp reappeared with a red volume in her hand.

" Viscount Broadstairs—eldest son of the Earl of Ramsgate ! " she read with wide-open eyes. " And he says he's directed to write, doesn't he ? Well, you are funny in England ! But I don't wonder I was afraid of Mr Disney."

" Oh, Mr Disney's secretary, I suppose. But, Mina——" Cecily was alive again now, but her awakening did not seem to be a pleasant one. She turned suddenly from her friend and, walking as far off as the little room would let her, flung herself into a chair.

" What's the matter ? " asked Mina, checked in her excited gaiety.

" What will Harry care about anything they can give him without Blent ? "

Mina flushed. The conspiracy was put before her—not by one of the conspirators but by her who was the object of it. She remembered Lady Evenswood's question and Southend's. She had answered that it might not much matter whether Harry liked his cousin or not. He had not loved Janie Iver. Where was the difference ?

" He won't want anything if he can't have Blent. Mina, did they say anything about me to Mr Disney ? "

" No," cried Mina eagerly.

" But they will, they mean to ? " Cecily was leaning forward eagerly now.

Mina had no denial ready. She seemed rather to hang on Cecily's words than to feel any need of speaking herself. She

was trying to follow Cecily's thoughts and to trace the cause of the apprehension, the terror almost, that had come on the girl's face.

" He'll see it—just as I see it ! " Cecily went on. " And, Mina——"

She paused again. Still Mina had no words, and no comfort for her. This sight of the other side of the question was too sudden. It was Harry then, and Harry only, who had really been in her thoughts ; and Cecily, her friend, was to be used as a tool. There might be little ground for blaming Southend who had never seen her, or Lady Evenswood who had been brought in purely in Harry's interest. But how stood Mina, who was Cecily's friend ? Yet at last a thought flashed into her mind and gave her a weapon.

" Well, what did you come to London for ? " she cried defiantly. " Why did you come, unless you meant that too ? "

Cecily started a little and lay back in her chair.

" Oh, I don't know," she murmured despondently. " He hates me, but if he's offered Blent and me he'll—he'll take us both, Mina, you know he will." An indignant rush of colour came on her cheeks. " Oh, it's very easy for you ! "

In a difficulty of that sort it did not seem that even Mr Disney could be of much avail.

" Oh, you Tristrams ! " cried Mina in despair.

CHAPTER XIX

In the Matter of Blinkhampton

PITY for the commander who, while engaging the enemy on his front with valour and success, breaking his line and driving him from his position, finds himself assailed in the rear by an unexpected or despised foe and the prize of victory suddenly wrenched from him ! His fate is more bitter than if he had failed in his main encounter, his self-reproaches more keen.

Major Duplay was awakening to the fact that this was his situation. Triumph was not his although Harry Tristram had fled from the battle. Iver's carefully guarded friendliness and the touch of motherly compassion in his wife's manner, Mrs Trumbler's tacit request (conveyed by a meek and Christian sympathy) that he should bow to the will of Providence, Miss S.'s malicious questions as to where he meant to spend the winter after leaving Merrion, told him the opinion of the world. Janie Iver had begun to think flirtation wrong ; and there was an altogether new and remarkable self-assertion about Bob Broadley. The last thing annoyed Duplay most. It is indeed absurd that a young man, formerly of a commendable humility, should think a change of demeanour justified merely because one young woman, herself insignificant, chooses for reasons good or bad to favour him. Duplay assumed to despise Bob ; it is often better policy to despise people than to enter into competition with them, and it is always rash to do both. These and other truths—as, for example, that for some purposes it is better not to be forty-four —the Major was learning. Was there any grain of comfort ? It lay in the fact that he was forty-four. A hypothetical, now impossible, yet subtly soothing Major of thirty routed Bob Broadley and carried all before him. In other words Duplay was driven back to the last Ditch of Consolation. What we could have done is the latest-tried plaster for the wound of what we cannot do ; it would be wise to try it sometimes a little earlier.

From the orthodox sentimentalist he could claim no compassion. He had lost not his heart's love but a very comfortable settlement ; he was wounded more in his vanity than in his affections ; he had wasted not his life, only one of his few remaining effective summers. But the more lax, who base their views on what men generally are, may spare him one of those less bitter tears which they appropriate to the misfortunes of others. If the tear as it falls meets a smile,—why not ? Such encounters are hardly unexpected and may well prove agreeable.

There was another disconsolate person in the valley of the Blent—little Mr Gainsborough, left alone in the big house with a note from his daughter commanding him to stay there and to say nothing to anybody. He was lonely, and nervous with the servants ; the curios gave him small pleasure since he had not bought them, and, if he had, they would not have been cheap. For reasons before indicated, Blentmouth and the curiosity-shop there had become too dangerous. Besides, he had no money ; Cecily had forgotten that detail in her hurried flight. A man cannot spend more than a portion of his waking hours in a library over pedigrees. Gainsborough found himself regretting London and the little house. If we divide humanity into those who do things and those who have to get out of the way while they are being done (just as reasonable a division as many adopted by statisticians) Gainsborough belonged to the latter class ; like most of us perhaps, but in a particularly unmistakable degree. And he knew he did—not perhaps like most of us in that. He never thought even of appealing to posterity.

Meanwhile Janie Iver was behaving as a pattern daughter, cherishing her mother and father and making home sweet, exercising, in fact, that prudent economy of wilfulness which preserves it for one great decisive struggle, and scorns to fritter it away on the details of daily life. Girls have adopted these tactics from the earliest days (so it is recorded or may be presumed), and wary are the parents who are not hoodwinked by them or, even if they perceive, are altogether unsoftened. Janie was very saintly at Fairholme ; the only sins which she could have found to confess (not that Mr Trumbler favoured confession—quite the contrary) were certain suppressions of

truth touching the direction in which she drove her dogcart —and even these were calculated to avoid the giving of pain. As for the Tristrams—where were they? They seemed to have dropped out of Janie's story.

Iver needed comfort. There is no disguising it, however much the admission may damage him in the eyes of that same orthodox sentimentalist. He had once expounded his views to Mr Jenkinson Neeld (or rather one of his expositions of them has been recorded, there having been more than one)—and the present situation did not satisfy them. Among other rehabilitations and whitewashings, that of the cruel father might well be undertaken by an ingenious writer; if Nero had had a grown-up daughter there would have been the chance! Anyhow the attempt would have met with some sympathy from Iver. Of course, a man desires his daughter's happiness (the remark is a platitude), but he may be allowed to feel annoyance at the precise form in which it realizes—or thinks it will realize—itself, a shape that may disappoint the aim of his career. If he is provided with a son, he has the chance of a more unselfish benevolence; but Iver was not. Let all be said that could be said—Bob Broadley was a disappointment. Iver would, if put to it, have preferred Duplay. There was at least a cosmopolitan polish about the Major; drawing-rooms would not appal him nor the thought of going to Court throw him into a perspiration. Iver had been keen to find out the truth about Harry Tristram, as keen as Major Duplay. At this moment both of them were wishing that the truth had never been discovered by them nor flung in the face of the world by Harry himself.

"But darling Janie will be happy," Mrs Iver used to say. She had surrendered very easily.

He was not really an unnatural parent because he growled once or twice, "Darling Janie be hanged!" It was rather his wife's attitude of mind that he meant to condemn.

Bob himself was hopeless from a parent's point of view. He was actually a little touched by Mrs Trumbler's way of looking at the world; he did think—and confessed it to Janie—that there was something very remarkable in the way Harry Tristram had been cleared from his path. He was in no sense an advanced thinker, and people in love are apt to believe in what

are called interpositions. Further, he was primitive in his ideas ; he had won the lady, and that seemed to him enough. It was enough, if he could keep her ; and in these days that really depends on herself. Moreover he had no doubt of keeping her ; his primitiveness appears again ; with the first kiss he seemed to pass from slave to master. Many girls would have taught him better. Janie was not one. She seemed rather to acquiesce, being, it must be presumed, also of a somewhat primitive cast of mind. It was terribly clear to Iver that the pair would stand to one another and settle down in inglorious contentment together for their lives. Yes, it was worse than Duplay ; something might have been made of him. As for Harry—Iver used to end by thinking how sensible a man old Mr Neeld was ; for Mr Neeld had determined to hold his tongue.

There was another vexation, of a different kind indeed, but also a check in his success. Blinkhampton was not going quite right. Blinkhampton was a predestined seaside resort on the South Coast, and Iver, with certain associates, meant to develop it. They had bought it up, and laid it out for building, and arranged for a big hotel with Birch & Company the famous furnishers. But all along in front of it—between where the street now was and the esplanade was soon to be—ran a long narrow strip, forming the estate of an elderly gentleman named Masters. Of course, Masters had to be bought out, the whole scheme hanging on that. Iver, keen at a bargain, hard in business hours (had not Mina Zabriska discovered that ?), confident that nobody would care to incur his enmity—he was powerful—by forestalling him, had refused Masters his price ; the old gentleman would have to come down. But some young men stepped in, with the rashness of their youth, and acquired an option of purchase from Masters. Iver smiled in a vexed fashion, but was not dismayed. He let it be known that anybody who advanced money to the young men—Sloyd, Sloyd, & Gurney was the firm—would be his enemies ; then he waited for the young men to approach him. They did not come. At last, pride protesting, prudence insisting, he wrote and suggested that they might probably be glad to make an arrangement with him. Mr Sloyd—our Mr Sloyd—wrote back that they had found a capitalist—no less

than that—and proposed to develop their estate themselves, to put up their own hotel, also a row of boarding-houses, a club, a winter garden, and possibly an aquarium. Youth and a sense of elation caused Sloyd to add that they would always be glad to co-operate with other gentlemen interested in Blinkhampton.

Iver had many irons in the fire ; he could no more devote himself exclusively and personally to Blinkhampton than Napoleon could spend all his time in the Peninsula. The transaction was important, yet hardly vital ; besides, Iver himself could keep his ear to the telephone. It was an opportunity for Bob to win his spurs ; Iver proposed to him to go to town and act as his representative.

" I'm afraid you'll lose the game if I play it for you, Mr Iver," responded Bob, with a shake of his head and a good-humoured smile. " I'm not accustomed to that sort of job, you know."

" It would be a good chance for you to begin to learn something of business."

" Well, you see, farming's my business. And I don't think I'm a fool at that. But building speculations and so on——" Bob shook his head again.

The progressive man gazed in wonder at the stationary. (We divide humanity again.)

" You've no desire for—for a broader sphere ? " he asked.

" Well, I like a quiet life, you see—with my horses, and my crops, and so on. Don't believe I could stand the racket." So far as physique was concerned, Bob could have stood penal servitude and a London Season combined.

" But it's an opening," Iver persisted, by now actually more puzzled than angry. " If you found yourself at home in the work, it might lead to anything." He resisted the temptation to add : " Look at me ! " Did not Fairholme, its lawns and greenhouses, say as much for him ?

" But I don't know that I want anything," smiled Bob. " Of course I'll have a shot if it'll oblige you," he added. " But—— Well, I'd rather not risk it, you know."

Janie was there. Iver turned to her in despair. She was smiling at Bob in an approving understanding way.

" It really isn't what would suit Bob, father," said she.

" Besides, if he went into your business, we should have to be so much in town and hardly ever be at home at Mingham."

At home at Mingham ! What a destiny ! Certainly Blent was in the same valley, but—— Well, a ' seat ' is one thing, and a farm's another ; the world is to blame again, no doubt. And with men who want nothing, for whom the word ' opening ' has no magic, what is to be done ? Abstractly they are seen to be a necessary element in the community ; but they do not make good sons or sons-in-law for ambitious men. Janie, when she had seen Bob, an unrepentant cheerful Bob, on his way, came back to find her father sitting sorrowful.

" Dearest father, I'm so sorry," she said, putting her arms round his neck.

He squared his shoulders to meet facts ; he could always do that. Moreover he looked ahead—that power was also among his gifts—and saw how presently this thing, like other things, would become a matter of course.

" That's settled, Janie," said he. " I've made my last suggestion."

She went off in distress to her mother, but was told to " let him alone." The wisdom of woman and of years spoke. Presently Iver went out to play golf. But his heart was still bitter within him ; he could not resist the sight of a possible sympathizer ; he mentioned to the Major, who was his antagonist in the game, that it was not often that a young fellow refused such a chance as he had just offered in vain to Bob Broadley. His prospective relationship to Bob had reached the stage of being assumed between Duplay and him, although it had not yet been explicitly mentioned.

" I wish somebody would try me ! " laughed the Major. " I'm kicking my heels all day down here."

Iver made no reply and played the round in silence. He lost, perhaps, because he was thinking of something else. He liked Duplay, he thought him clever, and, looking back on the history of the Tristram affair, he felt somehow that he would like to do the Major a good turn. Were they not in a sense companions in misfortune ?

Two days later Duplay sat in the offices of Sloyd, Sloyd & Gurney, as Iver's representative ; his mission was to represent to the youthful firm the exceeding folly of their conduct

in regard to Blinkhampton. His ready brain had assimilated all the facts, and they lost nothing by his ready tongue. He even made an impression on the enemy.

" It doesn't do to look at one transaction only, Mr Sloyd," he reminded the spruce but rather nervous young man. " It'll pay you to treat us reasonably. Mr Iver's a good friend to have and a bad enemy."

" I'm quite alive to all that ; but we have obtained a legitimate advantage and——" Sloyd was evidently a little puzzled, and he glanced at the clock.

" We recognize that ; we offer you two thousand pounds. We take over your option and give you two thousand." This was the figure that Iver and he had decided would tempt the young firm ; their fear of the great Mr Iver would make them content with that.

Sloyd was half inclined to be content ; the firm would make a thousand ; the balance would be good interest on the capitalist's ten thousand pounds ; and there would still be enough of a victory to soothe the feelings of everybody concerned.

" I'm expecting the gentleman who is associated with us. If you'll excuse me, I'll step out and see if he's arrived."

Duplay saw through the suggestion, but he had no objection to permitting a consultation. He lit his cigar and waited while Sloyd was away. The Major was in greater contentment with himself than he had been since he recognized his defeat. Next to succeeding, it is perhaps the pleasantest thing to make people regret that you have not succeeded. If he proved his capacity Iver would regret what had happened more ; possibly even Janie would come to regret it. And he was glad to be using his brains again. If they took the two thousand, if Iver got the Masters estate and entire control of Blinkhampton for twenty-two thousand, Duplay would have had a hand in a good bargain. He thought the Sloyds would yield. " Be strong about it," Iver had said. " These young fellows have plenty of enterprise, plenty of shrewdness, but they haven't got the grit to take big chances. They'll catch at a certainty." Sloyd's manner had gone far to bear out this opinion.

Sloyd returned, but, instead of coming in directly, he held the door and allowed another to pass in front of him. Duplay

jumped up with a muttered exclamation. What the deuce was Harry Tristram doing there? Harry advanced, holding out his hand.

"We neither of us thought we should meet in this way, Major Duplay? The world's full of surprises. I've learnt that anyhow, and I dare say you've known it a long while."

"You're in this business?" cried the Major, too astonished for any preamble.

Harry nodded. "Let's get through it," he said. "Because it's very simple. Sloyd and I have made up our minds exactly what we ought to have."

It was the same manner that the Major remembered seeing by the Pool—perhaps a trifle less aggressive, but making up for that by an even increased self-confidence. Duplay had thought of his former successful rival as a broken man. He was not that. He had never thought of him as a speculator in building land. Seemingly that was what he had become.

Harry sat down by the table, Sloyd standing by him and spreading out before him a plan of Blinkhampton and the elevation of a row of buildings.

"You ask us," Harry went on resentfully, almost accusingly, "to throw up this thing just when we're ready to go ahead. Everything's in train; we could begin work to-morrow."

"Come, come, where are you going to get the money?" interrupted Duplay. He felt that he must assert himself.

"Never mind, we can get it; or we can wait till we do. We shut you out just as badly whether we leave the old buildings or put up new. However, we shall get it. I'm satisfied as to that."

"You've heard my offer?"

"Yes," smiled Harry. "The reward for getting ahead of Mr Iver, is, it seems, two thousand pounds. It must be done pretty often if it's as cheap as that! I hope he's well?"

"Quite well, Mr Tristram, thank you. But when you talk of getting ahead of him——"

"Well, I put it plainly; that's all. I'm new to this, and I dare say Sloyd here would put it better. But my money's in it, so I like to have my say."

Both the dislike and the reluctant respect of old days were present in the Major's mind. He felt that the quality on whose

absence Iver had based his calculations had been supplied. Harry might be ignorant. Sloyd could supply the knowledge. Harry had that grit which hitherto the firm had lacked. Harry seemed to guess something of what was passing through his adversary's mind.

" I don't want to be anything but friendly. Neither Sloyd nor I want that—especially toward Mr Iver—or toward you, Major. We've been neighbours." He smiled and went on, smiling still : " Oddly enough, I've said what I'm going to say to you once before—on a different occasion. You seem to have been trying to frighten us. I am not to be frightened, that's all."

Sloyd whispered in his ear ; Duplay guessed that he counselled more urbanity ; Harry turned from him with a rather contemptuous little laugh. " Oh, I've got my living to earn now," Duplay heard him whisper—and reflected that he had never wasted much time on politeness, even before that necessity came upon him.

It was strange that Sloyd did not try to take any part in the discussion. He wore an air of deference, partly due no doubt to Harry's ability, yet having unmistakably a social flavour about it. Harry's lordlinesses clung to him still, and had their effect on his business partner. Duplay lodged an angry inward protest to the effect that they had none whatever on him.

" Perhaps I'd better just say what we want," Harry pursued. " We've paid Masters twenty thousand. We may be five hundred more out of pocket. Never mind that." He pushed away the plans and elevations. " You're empowered to treat, I suppose ? " he asked. Sloyd had whispered to him again.

" No," said Duplay. " But as a final offer, I think I can pledge Mr Iver to go as far as five thousand (over and above the twenty thousand, of course)—to cover absolutely everything, you know."

" Multiply your twenty-five by two, and we're your men," said Harry.

" Multiply it by two ? Fifty thousand ! Oh, nonsense ! "

" Twenty out of pocket—thirty profit. I call it very reasonable."

Major Duplay rose with a decisive air.

" I'm afraid I'm wasting your time," he said, " and my own too. I must say good afternoon."

" Pray, Major Duplay, don't be so abrupt, sir. We've——" It was Sloyd who spoke, with an eager gesture as though he would detain the visitor. Harry turned on him with his ugliest haughtiest scowl.

" I thought you'd left this to me, Sloyd ? " he said.

Sloyd subsided, apologetic but evidently terrified. Alas, that the grit had been supplied ! But for that a triumph must have awaited the Major. Harry turned to Duplay.

" I asked you before if you'd authority to treat. I ask you now if you've authority to refuse to treat."

" I've authority to refuse to discuss absurdities."

" Doubtless. And to settle what are absurdities ? Look here. I don't ask you to accept that proposal without referring to Mr Iver. I merely say that is the proposal, and that we give Mr Iver three days to consider it. After that our offer is withdrawn."

Sloyd was biting his nails—aye, those nails that he got trimmed in Regent Street twice a week ; critical transactions must bring grist to those skilled in manicure. Duplay glanced from his troubled face to Harry's solid, composed, even amused mask.

" And you might add," Harry went on, " that it would be a very good thing if Mr Iver saw his way to run up and have a talk with me. I think I could make him see the thing from our point of view." Something seemed to occur to him. " You must tell him that in ordinary circumstances I should propose to call on him and to come wherever he was, but—well, he'll understand that I don't want to go to Blentmouth just now."

The implied apology relieved what Duplay had begun to feel an intolerable arrogance, but it was a concession of form only, and did not touch the substance. The substance was and remained an ultimatum. The Major felt aggrieved ; he had been very anxious to carry his first commission through triumphantly and with *éclat*. For the second time Harry Tristram was in his path.

Harry rose. " That's all we can do to-day," he said. " We shall wait to hear from Mr Iver."

" I really don't feel justified in putting such a proposition before him."

" Oh, that's for you to consider," shrugged Harry. " I think I would though, if I were you. At the worst, it will justify you in refusing to do business with us. Do you happen to be walking down toward Pall Mall ? " Sloyd's offices were in Mount Street. " Good day, Sloyd. I'll drop in to-morrow."

With an idea that some concession might still be forthcoming, not from any expectation of enjoying his walk, the Major consented to accompany Harry.

" It was a great surprise to see you appear," he said as they started. " So odd a coincidence ! "

" Not at all," smiled Harry. " You guess why I went into it ? No ? Well, of course, I know nothing about such things really. But Sloyd happened to mention that Iver wanted to buy, so I thought the thing must be worth buying, and I looked into it." He laughed a little. " That's one of the penalties of a reputation like Iver's, isn't it ? "

" But I didn't know you'd taken to business at all."

" Oh, one must do something. I can't sit down on four hundred a year, you know. Besides, this is hardly business. By the by, though, I ought to be as much surprised to see you. We've both lost our situation, is that it, Major ? "

Insensibly the Major began to find him rather pleasanter, not a man he would ever like really, but all the same more tolerable than he had been at Blent ; so Harry's somewhat audacious reference was received with a grim smile.

" I knocked you out, you know," Harry pursued. " Left to himself, I don't believe old Bob Broadley would ever have moved. But I put him up to it."

" What ? " Duplay had not expected this.

" Well, you tried to put me out, you see. Besides, Janie Iver liked him, and she didn't care about you—or me either, for that matter. So just before I—well, disappeared—I told Bob that he'd win if he went ahead. And I gather he has won, hasn't he ? "

A brief nod from Duplay answered him ; he was still revolving the news about Bob Broadley.

" I'm afraid I haven't made you like me any better," said

Harry with a laugh. "And I don't go out of my way to get myself disliked. Do you see why I mentioned that little fact about Bob Broadley just now?"

"I confess I don't, unless you wished to annoy me. Or—pardon—perhaps you thought it fair that I should know?"

"Neither the one nor the other. I didn't do it from the personal point of view at all. You see, Bob had a strong position—and didn't know it."

Duplay glanced at him. "Well," he said, "what you did didn't help you, though it hurt me, perhaps."

"I told him he had a strong position. Then he took it. Hullo, here we are in Pall Mall. Now you see, don't you, Major?"

"No, I don't." Duplay was short in manner again.

"You don't see any parallel between Bob's position and our friend's up there in Mount Street?" Harry laughed again as he held out his hand. "Well, you tell the story to Iver and see if he does," he suggested.

"Oh, that's what you mean?" growled Duplay.

"Yes," assented Harry, almost gleefully. "That's what I mean; only this time it won't hurt you, and I think it will help me. You've done all you could, you know."

The touch of patronage came again. Duplay had hard work to keep his temper under. Yet now it was rather annoyance that he felt than the black dislike that he used to harbour. Harry's misfortune had lessened that. If only Harry had been more chastened by his misfortune the annoyance might have gone too. Unfortunately, the young man seemed almost exultant.

"Well, good-bye. Write to Sloyd—unless Iver decides to come up. And don't forget that little story about Bob Broadley! Because you'll find it useful, if you think of frightening Sloyd. He can't move without me—and I don't move without my price."

"You moved from Blent," Duplay reminded him, stung to a sudden malice.

"Yes," said Harry thoughtfully. "Yes, so I did. Well, I suppose I had my price. Good-bye." He turned away and walked quickly down the street.

"What was his price?" asked the Major puzzled. He was

not aware that Harry had got anything out of his surrender ; and even Harry himself seemed rather to conclude that, since he had moved, he must have got his price than to say that he had got it or to be able to tell what it was.

But all that was not the question now. Duplay sought the telegraph office and informed Iver of the uncompromising attitude of the enemy. He added that Harry Tristram was in the business and that Harry suggested an interview. It was perhaps the most significant tribute that Harry had yet received when, after a few minutes of surprise and a few more of consideration, Iver telegraphed back that he would come up to town, and wished an appointment to be made for him with Mr Tristram. It was something to force Napoleon to come to the Peninsula.

In fact, the only thing that could upset Iver's plans was blank defiance. Reviewing his memories of Harry Tristram, he knew that defiance was just what he had to fear. It was in the blood of the Tristrams, and prudence made no better a resistance than propriety.

CHAPTER XX

The Tristram Way—a Specimen

HARRY TRISTRAM had led Lady Evenswood to believe that he would inform himself of his cousin's state of mind, or even open direct communication with her. He had done nothing to redeem this implied promise, although the remembrance of it had not passed out of his mind. But he was disinclined to fulfil it. In the first place, he was much occupied with the pursuits and interests of his new life ; secondly, he saw no way to approach her in which he would not seem a disagreeable reminder ; he might even be taken for a beggar or at least regarded as a reproachful suppliant. The splendour, the dramatic effect of his surrender and of the scene which had led up to it, would be endangered and probably spoilt by a resumption of intercourse between them. His disappearance had been magnificent—no other conclusion could explain the satisfaction with which he looked back on the episode. There was no material yet for a reappearance equally striking. When he thought about her —which was not very often just now—it was not to say that he would never meet her again ; he liked her too well, and she was too deeply bound up with the associations of his life for that ; but it was to decide to postpone the meeting, and to dream perhaps of some progress or turn of events which should present him with his opportunity, and invest their renewed acquaintance with an atmosphere as unusual and as stimulating as that in which their first days together had been spent. Thus thinking of her only as she affected him, he remained at heart insensible to the aspect of the case which Lady Evenswood had commended to his notice. Cecily's possible unhappiness did not come home to him. After all, she had everything and he nothing—and even he was not insupportably unhappy. His idea, perhaps, was that Blent and a high position would console most folk for somebody else's bad luck ; men in bad luck themselves will easily take such a view as that ; their intimacy makes a second-hand acquaintance with sorrow seem a trifling trouble.

Yet he had known his mother well. And he had made his surrender. Well, only a very observant man can tell what his own moods may be ; it is too much to ask anybody to prophesy another's ; and the last thing a man appreciates are the family peculiarities—unless he happens not to share them.

Southend was working quietly ; aided by Jenkinson Neeld, he had prepared an elaborate statement and fired it in at Mr Disney's door, himself retreating as hastily as the urchin who has thrown a cracker. Lady Evenswood was trying to induce her eminent cousin to come to tea. The Imp, in response to that official missive which had made such an impression on her, was compiling her reminiscences of Heidelberg and Addie Tristram. Everybody was at work, and it was vaguely understood that Mr Disney was considering the matter, at least that he had not consigned all the documents to the wastepaper-basket and the writers to perdition—which was a great point gained with Mr Disney. "No hurry, give me time"—"don't push it"—"wait"—"do nothing"—"the *status quo*"—all these various phrases expressed Lord Southend's earnest and reiterated advice to the conspirators. A barony had, in his judgment, begun to be a thing which might be mentioned without a smile. And the viscounty—— Well, said Lady Evenswood, if Robert were once convinced, the want of precedents would not stop him ; precedents must, after all, be made, and why should not Robert make them ?

This then, the moment when all the wise and experienced people were agreed that nothing could, should, or ought to be done, was the chance for a Tristram. Addie would have seized it without an instant's hesitation ; Cecily, her blood unavoidably diluted with a strain of Gainsborough, took two whole days to make the plunge—two days and a struggle, neither of which would have happened had she been Addie. But she did at last reach the conclusion that immediate action was necessary, that she was the person to act, that she could endure no more delay, that she must herself go to Harry and do the one terrible thing which alone suited, met, and could save the situation. It was very horrible to her. Here was its last and irresistible fascination. Mina supplied Harry's address—ostensibly for the purpose of a letter ; nothing else was necessary but a hansom cab.

In his quiet room in Duke Street Harry was working out some details of the proposed buildings at Blinkhampton. Iver was to come to town next day, and Harry thought that the more entirely ready they seemed to go on, the more eager Iver would be to stop them ; so he was at it with his elevations, plans, and estimates. It was just six o'clock, and a couple of quiet hours stretched before him. Nothing was in his mind except Blinkhampton ; he had forgotten himself and his past fortunes, Blent and the rest of it ; he had even forgotten the peculiarities of his own family. He heard with most genuine vexation that a lady must see him on urgent business ; but he had not experience enough to embolden him to send word that he was out.

Such a message would probably have availed nothing. Cecily was already at the door ; she was in the room before he had done giving directions that she should be admitted. Again the likeness which had already worked on him so powerfully struck him with unlessened force ; for its sake he sprang forward to greet her and met her outstretched hands with his. There was no appearance of embarrassment about her, rather a great gladness and a triumph in her own courage in coming. She seemed quite sure that she had done the right thing.

" You didn't come to me, so I came to you," she explained, as though the explanation were quite sufficient.

She brought everything back to him very strongly—and in a moment banished Blinkhampton.

" Does anybody know you've come ? "

" No," she smiled. That was a part of the fun. " Mina didn't know I was going out. You see everybody's been doing something except me and——"

" Everybody doing something ? Doing what ? "

" Oh, never mind now. Nothing of any real use."

" There's nothing to do," said Harry with a smile and a shrug.

She was a little disappointed to find him looking so well, so cheerful, so busy. But the new impression was not strong enough to upset the preconceptions with which she had come. " I've come to tell you I can't bear it," she said. " Oh, why did you ever do it, Harry ? "

" On my honour I don't know," he admitted after a moment's thought. " Won't you sit down ? " He watched her seat

herself, actually hoping for the famous attitude. But she was too excited for it. She sat upright, her hands clasped on her knees. Her air was one of gravity, of tremulous importance. She realized what she was going to do ; if she had failed to understand its very unusual character she would probably never have done it at all.

" I can't bear this state of things," she began. " I can't endure it any longer."

" Oh, I can, I'm all right. I hope you haven't been worrying ? "

" Worrying ! I've robbed you, robbed you of everything. Oh, I know you did it yourself ! That makes it worse. How did I come to make you do it ? "

" I don't know," he said again. " Well, you seemed so in your place at Blent. Somehow you made me feel an interloper. And——" He paused a moment. " Yes, I'm glad," he ended.

" No, no, you mustn't be glad," she cried quickly. " Because it's unendurable, unendurable ! "

" To you ? It's not to me. I thought it might be. It isn't."

" Yes, to me, to me ! Oh, end it for me, Harry, end it for me ! "

She was imploring, she was the suppliant. The reversal of parts, strange in itself, hardly seemed strange to Harry Tristram. And it made him quite his old self again. He felt that he had something to give. But her next words shattered that delusion.

" You must take it back. Let me give it back to you," she prayed.

He was silent a full minute before he answered slowly and coldly.

" From anybody else I should treat that as an insult ; with you I'm willing to think it merely ignorance. In either case the absurdity's the same." He turned away from her with a look of distaste, almost of disgust. " How in the world could you do it ? " he added by way of climax.

" I could do it. In one way I could." She rose as he turned back to her. " I want you to have Blent. You're the proper master of Blent. Do you think I want to have it by accident ? "

" You have it by law, not by accident," he answered curtly. He was growing angry. " Why do you come here and unsettle me ? " he demanded. " I wasn't thinking of it. And then you come here ! "

She was apologetic no longer. She faced him boldly.

" You ought to think of it," she insisted. " And, yes, I've come here because it was right for me to come, because I couldn't respect myself unless I came. I want you to take back Blent."

" What infernal nonsense ! " he exclaimed. " You know it's impossible."

" No," she said ; she was calm but her breath came quick. " There's one way in which it's possible."

In an instant he understood her ; there was no need of more words. She knew herself to be understood as she looked at him ; and for a while she looked steadily. But his gaze too was long, and it became very searching, so that presently, in spite of her efforts, she felt herself flushing red, and her eyes fell. The room had become uncomfortably quiet too. At last he spoke.

" I suppose you remember what I told you about Janie Iver," he said, " and that's how you came to think I might do this. You must see that that was different. I gave as much as I got there. She was rich, I was——" He smiled sourly. " I was Tristram of Blent. You are Tristram of Blent, I am——" He shrugged his shoulders.

He made no reference to the personal side of the case. She was not hurt, she was enormously relieved.

" I'm not inclined to be a pensioner on my wife," he said.

She opened her lips to speak ; she was within an ace of telling him that, if this and that went well, he would have so assured and recognized a position that none could throw stones at him. Her words died away in face of the peremptory finality of his words, and the bitter anger on his face. She sat silent and forlorn, wondering what had become of her resolve and her inspiration.

" In my place you would feel as I do," he said a moment later. His tone was milder. " You can't deny it," he insisted. " Look me in the face and deny it if you can. I know you too well."

For some minutes longer she sat still. Then she got up with a desolate air. Everything seemed over ; the great offer, with its great scene, had come to very little. Anti-climax, foe to emotion ! She remembered how the scene in the Long Gallery had gone. So much better, so much better ! But Harry dominated her—and he had stopped the scene. Without attempting to bid him any farewell she moved toward the door slowly and drearily.

She was arrested by his voice—a new voice, very good-natured, rather chaffing.

" Are you doing anything particular to-night ? " he asked.

She turned round ; he was smiling at her in an open but friendly amusement.

" No," she murmured. " I'm going back home, I suppose."

" To Blent ? " he asked quickly.

" No, to our house. Mina's there and——" Her face was puzzled ; she left her sentence unfinished.

" Well, I've got nothing to do. Let's have dinner and go somewhere together ? "

Their eyes met. Gradually Cecily's lightened into a sparkle as her lips bent and her white teeth showed a little. She was almost laughing outright as she answered readily, without so much as a show of hesitation or a hint of surprise : " Yes."

Nothing else can be so ample as a monosyllable is sometimes. If it had been Harry's object to escape from a tragic or sensational situation he had achieved it triumphantly. The question was no longer who should have Blent, but where they should have dinner. Nothing in his manner showed that he had risked and succeeded in a hazardous experiment ; he had brought her down to the level of common-sense—that is, to his own view of things ; incidentally he had secured what he hoped would prove a very pleasant evening. Finally he meant to have one more word with her on the matter of her visit before they parted. His plan was very clear in his head. By the end of the evening she would have forgotten the exalted mood which had led her into absurdity ; she would listen to a few wise and weighty words—such as he would have at command. Then the ludicrous episode would be over and done with for ever ; to its likeness, superficially at least rather

strong, to that other scene in which he had been chief actor his mind did not advert.

A very pleasant evening it proved ; so that it prolonged itself, naturally as it were and without express arrangement, beyond dinner and the play, and embraced in its many hours a little supper and a long drive in a cab to those distant regions where Cecily's house was situated. There was no more talk of Blent ; there was some of Harry's new life, its features and its plans ; there was a good deal about nothing in particular ; and there was not much of any sort as they drove along in the cab at one o'clock in the morning.

But Harry's purpose was not forgotten. He bade the cabman wait and followed Cecily into the house. He looked round it with lively interest and curiosity.

" So this is where you came from ! " he exclaimed with a compassionate smile. " You do want something to make up for this ! "

She laughed as she took off her hat and sank into a chair. " Yes, this is—home," she said.

" Have you had a pleasant evening ? " he demanded.

" You know I have."

" Are you feeling friendly to me ? "

Now came the attitude ; she threw herself into it and smiled.

" That's what I wanted," he went on. " Now I can say what I have to say."

She sat still, waiting to hear him. There was now no sign of uneasiness about her. She smiled luxuriously, and her eyes were resting on his face with evident pleasure. They were together again as they had been in the Long Gallery ; the same contentment possessed her. The inner feeling had its outward effect. There came on him the same admiration, the same sense that she commanded his loyalty. When she had come to his rooms that afternoon he had found it easy to rebuke and to rule her. His intent for the evening had been the same ; he had sought to bring her to a more friendly mind chiefly that she might accept with greater readiness the chastening of cool common-sense, and a rebuke from the decent pride which her proposal had outraged. Harry was amazed to find himself suddenly at a loss, looking at the girl, hardly knowing how to speak to her.

" Well ? " she said. Where now was the tremulous excitement ? She was magnificently at her ease and commanded him to speak, if he had anything to say. If not, let him hold his peace.

But he was proud and obstinate too. They came to a conflict there in the little room—the forgotten cab waiting outside, the forgotten Mina beginning to stir in her bed, as voices dimly reached her ears and she awoke to the question—where was Cecily ?

" If we're to be friends," Harry began, " I must hear no more of what you said this afternoon. You asked me to be a pensioner, you proposed yourself to be——" He did not finish. The word was not handy, or he wished to spare her.

She showed no signs of receiving mercy.

" Very well," she said, smiling. " If you knew everything, you wouldn't talk like that. I suppose you've no idea what it cost me ? "

" What it cost you ? "

She broke into a scornful laugh. " You know what it really meant. Still you've only a scolding for me ! How funny that you see one half and not the other ! But you've given me a very pleasant evening, Cousin Harry."

" You must leave my life alone," he insisted brusquely.

" Oh, yes, for the future. I've nothing left to offer, have I ? I have been—refused ! " She seemed to exult in the abandonment of her candour.

He looked at her angrily, almost dangerously. For a passing moment she had a sensation of that physical fear from which no moral courage can wholly redeem the weak in body. But she showed none of it ; her pose was unchanged ; only the hand on which her head rested shook a little. And she began to laugh. " You look as if you were going to hit me," she said.

" Oh, you do talk nonsense ! " he groaned. But she was too much for him ; he laughed too. She had spoken with such a grand security. " If you tell me to walk out of the door I shall go."

" Well, in five minutes. It's very late."

" Oh, we weren't bred in Bayswater," he reminded her.

" I was—in Chelsea."

" So you say. I think in Heaven—no, Olympus—really."

" Have you said what you wanted to say, Cousin Harry ? "

" I suppose you hadn't the least idea what you were doing ? "

" I was as cool as you were when you gave me Blent."

" You're cool enough now, anyhow," he admitted, in admiration of her parry.

" Quite, thanks." The hand behind her head trembled sorely. His eyes were on her, and a confusion threatened to overwhelm the composure of which she boasted.

" I gave you Blent because it was yours."

" What I offered you is mine."

" By God, no. Never your's to give till you've lost it ! "

With an effort she kept her poise. His words hummed through her head.

" Did you say that to Janie Iver ? " she mustered coolness to ask him mockingly.

He thrust away the taunt with a motion of his hand ; one of Gainsborough's gimcracks fell smashed on the floor. Cecily laughed, glad of the excuse to seem at her ease.

" Hang the thing ! If you'd loved me, you'd have been ashamed to do it."

" I was ashamed without loving you, Cousin Harry."

" Oh, do drop ' Cousin ' Harry ! "

" Well, I proposed to. But you wouldn't." Her only refuge now was in quips and verbal victories. They served her well, for Harry, less master of himself than usual, was hindered and tripped up by them. " Still, if we ever meet again, I'll say ' Harry ' if you like."

" Of course we shall meet again." She surprised that out of him.

" It'll be so awkward for me now," she laughed lightly. But her mirth broke off suddenly as he came closer and stood over her.

" I could hate you for coming to me with that offer," he said.

Almost hating herself now, yet sorely wounded that he should think of hating her, she answered him in a fury :

" Well then, shouldn't I hate you for giving me Blent ? That was worse. You could refuse, I couldn't. I have it, I have to keep it." In her excitement she rose and faced him. " And because of you I can't be happy ! " she cried resentfully.

" I see ! I ought to have drowned myself, instead of merely going away ? Oh, I know I owe the world at large apologies for my existence, and you in particular, of course ! Unfortunately, though, I intend to go on existing ; I even intend to live a life of my own—not the life of a hanger-on—if you'll kindly allow me."

" Would any other man in the world talk like this after——? "

" Any man who had the sense to see what you'd done. I'm bound to be a nuisance to you anyhow. I should be least of a nuisance as your husband ! That was it. Oh, I'm past astonishment at you."

His words sounded savage, but it was not their fierceness that banished her mirth. It was the new light they threw on that impulse of hers. She could only fall back on her old recrimination.

" When you gave me Blent——"

" Hold your tongue about Blent," he commanded imperiously. " If it were mine again, and I came to you and said : ' You're on my conscience, you fret me, you worry me. Marry me, and I shall be more comfortable ! ' What then ? "

" Why, it would be just like you to do it ! " she cried in malicious triumph.

" The sort of thing runs in the family, then." She started at the plainness of his sneer. " Oh, yes, that was it. Well, what would your answer be ? Shall I tell you ? You'd ask the first man who came by to kick me out of the room. And you'd be right."

The truth of his words pierced her. She flushed red, but she was resolved to admit nothing. Before him, at any rate, she would cling to her case, to the view of her own action to which she stood committed. He at least should never know that now at last he had made her bitterly and horribly ashamed, with a shame not for what she had proposed to do herself, but for what she had dared to ask him to do. She saw the thing now as he saw it. Had his manner softened, had he made any appeal, had he not lashed her with the bitterest words he could find, she would have been in tears at his feet. But now she faced him so boldly that he took her flush to mean anger. He turned away from her and picked up his hat from the chair on which he had thrown it.

" Well, that's all, isn't it ? " he asked.

Before she had time to answer, there was a cry from the doorway, full of astonishment, consternation, and (it must be added) outraged propriety. For it was past two o'clock, and Mina Zabriska, for all her freakishness, had been bred on strict lines of decorum. " Cecily ! " she cried. " And you ! " she added a moment later. They turned and saw her standing there in her dressing-gown, holding a candle. The sudden turn of events, the introduction of this new figure, the intrusion that seemed so absurd, overcame Cecily. She sank back in her chair, and laid her head on her hands on the table, laughing hysterically. Harry's frown grew heavier.

" Oh, you're there ? " he said to Mina. " You're in it too, I suppose ? I've always had the misfortune to interest you, haven't I ? You wanted to turn me out first. Now you're trying to put me in again, are you ? Oh, you women, can't you leave a man alone ? "

" I don't know what you're talking about. And what are you doing here ? Do you know it's half-past two ? "

" It would be all the same to me if it was half-past twenty-two," said Harry contemptuously.

" You've been with her all the time ? "

" Oh, lord, yes. Are you the chaperon ? " He laughed, as he unceremoniously clapped his hat on his head. " We've had an evening out, my cousin and I, and I saw her home. And now I'm going home. Nothing wrong, I hope, Madame Zabriska ? "

Cecily raised her head ; she was laughing still, with tears in her eyes.

Mina looked at her. Considerations of propriety fell into the background.

" But what's it all about ? " she cried.

" I'll leave Cecily to tell you." He was quiet now, but with a vicious quietness. " I've been explaining that I have a preference for being left alone. Perhaps it may not be superfluous to mention the fact to you too, Madame Zabriska. My cab's waiting. Good night." He looked a moment at Cecily, and his eyes seemed to dwell a little longer than he had meant. In a tone rather softer and more gentle he repeated : " Good night."

Cecily sprang to her feet. " I shall remember ! " she cried. " I shall remember ! If ever—if ever the time comes, I shall remember ! " Her voice was full of bitterness, her manner proudly defiant.

Harry hesitated a moment, then smiled grimly. " I shouldn't be able to complain of that," he said, as he turned and went out to his cab.

Cecily threw herself into her chair again. The bewildered Imp stood staring at her.

" I didn't know where you were," Mina complained.

" Oh, it doesn't matter."

" Fancy being here with him at this time of night ! "

Cecily gave no signs of hearing this superficial criticism on her conduct.

" You must tell me what it's all about," Mina insisted.

Cecily raised her eyes with a weary air, as though she spoke of a distasteful subject unwillingly and to no good purpose.

" I went to tell him he could get Blent back by marrying me."

" Cecily ! " Many emotions were packed into the cry. " What did he say ? "

Cecily seemed to consider for a moment, then she answered slowly :

" Well, he very nearly beat me—and I rather wish he had," she said.

The net result of the day had distinctly not been to further certain schemes. All that had been achieved—and both of them had contributed to it—was an admirable example of the Tristram way.

CHAPTER XXI

The Persistence of Blent

HARRY TRISTRAM awoke the next morning with visions in his head—no unusual thing with young men, yet strange and almost unknown to him. They had not been wont to come at Blent, nor had his affair with Janie Iver created them. Possibly a constant, although unconscious, reference of all attractions to the standard, or the tradition, of Addie Tristram's had hitherto kept him free ; or perhaps it was merely that there were no striking attractions in the valley of the Blent. Anyhow the visions were here now, a series of them covering all the hours of the evening before, and embodying for him the manifold changes of feeling which had marked the time. He saw himself as well as Cecily, and the approval of his eyes was still for himself, their irritation for her. But he could not dismiss her from the pictures ; he realized this with a new annoyance. He lay later than his custom was, looking at her, recalling what she had said as he found the need of words to write beneath each mental apparition. Under the irritation, and greater than it, was the same sort of satisfaction that his activities had given him—a feeling of more life and broader ; this thing, though rising out of the old life, fitted in well with the new. Above all, that sentence of hers rang in his head, its extravagance perhaps gaining pre-eminence for it : " If ever the time comes, I shall remember ! "

The time did not seem likely to come—so far as he could interpret the vague and rather threadbare phrase—but her resolution stirred his interest, and ended by exacting his applause. He was glad that she had resisted, and had not allowed herself to be trampled on. Though the threat was very empty, its utterance showed a high spirit, such a spirit as he still wished to preside over Blent. It was just what his mother might have said, with an equal intensity of determination and an equal absence of definite purpose. But then the whole proceedings had been just what he could imagine his mother bringing about. Consequently he was rather blind to

the extraordinary character of the step Cecily had taken ; so far he was of the same clay as his cousin. He was, however, none the less outraged by it, and none the less sure that he had met it in the right way. Yet he did not consider that there was any quarrel between them, and he meant to see more of her ; he was accustomed to ' scenes ' occurring and leaving no permanent estrangement or bitterness ; the storms blew over the sand, but they did not in the end make much difference in the sand.

There was work to be done—the first grave critical bit of work he had ever had to do, the first real measuring of himself against an opponent of proved ability. So he would think no more about the girl. This resolve did not work. She, or rather her apparition, seemed to insist that she had something to do with the work, was concerned in it, or at least meant to look on at it. Harry found that he had small objection, or even a sort of welcome for her presence. Side by side with the man's pleasure in doing the thing, there was still some of the boy's delight in showing he could do it. What had passed yesterday, particularly that idea of doing things for him which he had detected and raged at, made it additionally pleasant that he should be seen to be capable of doing things for himself. All this was vague, but it was in his mind as he walked to Sloyd's offices.

Grave and critical ! Sloyd's nervous excitement and uneasy deference toward Iver were the only indications of any such thing. Duplay was there in the background, cool and easy. Iver himself was inclined to gossip with Harry and to chaff him on the fresh departure he had made, rather than to settle down to a discussion of Blinkhampton. That was after all a small matter—so his manner seemed to assert ; he had been in town anyhow, so he dropped in ; Duplay had made a point of it in his scrupulous modesty as to his own experience. Harry found that he could resist the impression he was meant to receive only by saying to himself as he faced his old friend and present antagonist : " But you're here—you're here—you're here ! " Iver could neither gossip nor argue that fact away.

" Well now," said Iver with a glance at his watch, " we must really get to business. You don't want to live in Blinkhampton, you gentlemen, I suppose ? You want to leave a little better

for your visit, eh ? Quite so. That's the proper thing with the seaside. But you can't expect to find fortunes growing on the beach. Surely Major Duplay mistook your figures ? "

" Unless he mentioned fifty thousand, he did," said Harry firmly.

" H'm, I did you injustice, Major—with some excuse, though. Surely, Mr Sloyd——? " He turned away from Harry as he spoke.

" I beg pardon," interrupted Harry. " Am I to talk to Major Duplay ? "

Iver looked at him curiously. " Well, I'd rather talk to you, Harry," he said. " And I'll tell you plainly what I think. Mr Sloyd's a young business man—so are you."

" I'm a baby," Harry agreed.

" And blackmailing big people isn't a good way to start." He watched Harry, but he did not forget to watch Sloyd too. " Of course I use the word in a figurative sense. The estate's not worth half that money to you ; we happen to want it—Oh, I'm always open !—So——" He gave a shrug.

" Sorry to introduce new and immoral methods into business, Mr Iver. It must be painful to you after all these years." Harry laughed good-humouredly. " I shall corrupt the Major, too ! " he added.

" We'll give you five thousand for your bargain—twenty-five in all."

" I suggested to Major Duplay that being ahead of you was so rare an achievement that it ought to be properly recognized."

Duplay whispered to Iver. Sloyd whispered to Harry. Iver listened attentively, Harry with evident impatience. " Let it go for thirty, don't make an enemy of him," had been Sloyd's secret counsel.

" My dear Harry, the simple fact is that the business won't stand more than a certain amount. If we put money into Blinkhampton, it's because we want it to come out again. Now the crop will be limited." He paused. " I'll make you an absolutely final offer—thirty."

" My price is fifty," said Harry immovably.

" Out of the question."

" All right." Harry lit a cigarette with an air of having finished the business.

" It simply cannot be done on the figures," Iver declared with genuine vexation. " We've worked it out, Harry, and it can't be done. If I showed our calculations to Mr Sloyd, who is, I'm sure, willing to be reasonable——"

" Yes, Mr Iver, I am. I am, I hope, always desirous of—er—meeting gentlemen half-way ; and nothing could give me greater pleasure than to do business with you, Mr Iver."

" Unfortunately you seem to have—a partner," Iver observed. " No, I've told you the most we can give." He leant back in his chair. This time it was he who had finished business.

" And I've told you the least we can take."

" It's hopeless. Fifty ! Oh, we should be out of pocket. It's really unreasonable." He was looking at Sloyd. " It's treating me as an enemy,—and I shall have no alternative but to accept the situation. Blinkhampton is not essential to me ; and your hotel and so on won't flourish much if I leave my tumble-down cottages and pigsties just behind them. Will you put these papers together, Duplay ? "

The Major obeyed leisurely. Sloyd was licking his lips and looking acutely unhappy.

" You're absolutely resolved, Harry ? "

" Absolutely, Mr Iver."

" Well, I give it up. It's bad for me, and it's worse for you. In all my experience I never was so treated. You won't even discuss ! If you'd said thirty-five, well, I'd have listened. If you'd even said forty, I'd have——"

" I say, Done for forty ! " said Harry quietly. " I'd a sort of idea all the time that that might be your limit. I expect the thing really wouldn't stand fifty, you know. Oh, that's just my notion."

Iver's face was a study. He was surprised, he was annoyed, but he was also somewhat amused. Harry's acting had been good. That obstinate, uncompromising immutable fifty—Iver had really believed in it. And forty had been his limit—his extreme limit. He just saw his way to square his accounts satisfactorily if he were driven to pay that as the penalty of one of his rare mistakes. He glanced at Sloyd ; radiant joy and relief illumined that young man's face, as he gave his moustache an upward twirl. Duplay was smiling—yes, smiling. At last Iver smiled too. Harry was grave—not solemn—but merely

not smiling because he did not perceive anything to smile at. No doubt he was gratified by the success of his tactics, and pleased that his formidable opponent had been deceived by them. But he thought nothing of what impressed Iver most. The tactics had been, no doubt, well conceived and carried out, but they were ordinary enough in their nature; Iver himself, and dozens of men he had met, could have executed them as well. What struck him was that Harry knew how far he could go, that he stopped on the verge, but not beyond the boundary where a deal was possible. Mere guesswork could not account for that, nor had he commanded the sources of information which would have made the conclusion a matter of ordinary intelligent calculation. No, he had intuitions; he must have an eye. Now eyes were rare; and when they were found they were to be used. Iver was much surprised at finding one in Harry. Yet it must be in Harry; Iver was certain that Sloyd had known nothing of the plan of campaign or of the decisive figure on which his associate had pitched.

"I'll give you forty," he said at last. "For the whole thing, lock, stock, and barrel—forty."

"It's a bargain," said Harry, and Iver, with a sigh (for forty was the extreme figure), pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

"We've got a good many plans, sir," suggested Sloyd, very anxious to establish pleasant relations. "I'm sure we should be very glad if you found them of any service."

"You're very good, Mr Sloyd, but——"

"You may as well have a look at them," interrupted Harry. "There are one or two good ideas. You'll explain them, won't you, Sloyd?"

Sloyd had already placed one in Iver's hand, who glanced at it, took another, compared them, and after a minute's pause held both out to the Major.

"Well, Duplay, suppose you look at them and hear anything that Mr Sloyd is good enough to say, and report to me? You're at leisure?"

"Certainly," said Duplay. He was in good humour, better perhaps than if his chief had proved more signally successful. Harry turned to him, smiling.

" I saw Madame Zabriska last night, at Lady Tristram's house. She's forsaken you, Major ? "

" Mina's very busy about something," smiled the Major.

" Yes, she generally is," said Harry, frowning a little. " If she tells you anything about me——"

" I'm not to believe it ? "

" You may believe it, but not the way she puts it," laughed Harry.

" Now there's an end of business ! Walk down to the Imperium with me, Harry, and have a bit of lunch. You've earned it, eh ? How do you like the feeling of making money ? "

" Well, I think it might grow on a man. What's your experience ? "

" Sometimes better than this morning, or I should hardly have been your neighbour at Fairholme."

The two walked off together, leaving Duplay and Sloyd very amicable. Iver was thoughtful.

" You did that well," he said as they turned the corner into Berkeley Square.

" I suppose I learnt to bluff a bit when I was at Blent."

" That was all right, but—well, how did you put your finger on the figure ? "

" I don't know. It looked like being about that, you know."

" It was very exactly that," admitted Iver.

" Rather a surprise to find our friend the Major going into business with you."

" He'll be useful, I think, and—well, I'm short of help." He was eyeing Harry now, but he said no more about the morning's transaction till they reached the club.

" Perhaps we shall find Neeld here," he remarked, as they went in.

They did find Neeld, and also Lord Southend, the latter gentleman in a state of disturbance about his curry. It was not what any man would seriously call a curry ; it was no more than a fortuitous concurrence of mutton and rice.

" It's an extraordinary thing," he observed to Iver, " that whenever Wilmot Edge is away, the curries in this club go to

the devil—to the devil. And he's always going off somewhere, confound him ! "

" He can't be expected to stay at home just to look after your curry," Iver suggested.

" I suppose he's in South America, or South Africa, or South somewhere or other out of reach. Waiter ! " The embarrassed servant came. " When is Colonel Edge expected back ? "

" In a few weeks, I believe, my lord."

" Who's Chairman of the Committee while he's away ? "

" Mr Gore-Marston, my lord."

" There—what can you expect ? " He pushed away his plate. " Bring me some cold beef," he commanded, and the waiter brought it with an air that said " Ichabod " for the Imperium. " As soon as ever Edge comes back, I shall draw his attention to the curry."

Everybody else had rather lost their interest in the subject. Neeld and Harry were in conversation. Iver sat down by Southend, and, while lunch was preparing, endeavoured to distract his mind by giving him a history of the morning. Southend, too, was concerned in Blinkhampton. Gradually the curry was forgotten as he listened to the story of Harry's victory.

" Sort of young fellow who might be useful ? " he suggested presently.

" That's what I was thinking. He's quite ready to work too, I fancy."

Southend regarded his friend. He was thinking that if this and that happened—and they were things now within the bounds of possibility—Iver might live to be sorry that Harry was not to be his son-in-law. Hastily and in ignorance he included Janie in the scope of this supposed regret. But at this moment the guilty and incompetent Mr Gore-Marston had the misfortune to come in. Southend, all his grievance revived, fell on him tooth and nail. His defence was feeble ; he admitted that he knew next to nothing of curries, and—yes, the cook did get careless when Wilmot Edge's vigilant eye was removed.

" He'll be home soon," Gore-Marston pleaded. " I've had a letter from him ; he's just got back to civilization after

being out in the wilderness, shooting, for six weeks. He'll be here in a month now, I think."

"We shall have to salary him to stay," growled Southend.

Harry was amused at this little episode, and listened smiling. Possessing a knowledge of curries seemed an odd way to acquire importance for a fellow-creature, a strange reason for a man's return being desired. He knew who Wilmot Edge was, and it was funny to hear of him again in connexion with curries. And curries seemed the only reason why anybody should be interested in Colonel Edge's return. Not till they met again in the smoking-room were the curries finally forgotten.

In later days Harry came to look back on that afternoon as the beginning of many new things for him. Iver and Southend talked; old Mr Neeld sat by, listening with the interest of a man who feels he has missed something in life and would fain learn, even though he is too old to turn the knowledge to account. Harry found himself listening too, but in a different way.

They were not talking idly; they talked for him. That much he soon discerned. And they were not offering to help him. His vigilant pride, still sore from the blow that Cecily had dealt it, was on the look-out for that. But the triumph of the morning, no less than the manner of the men, reassured him. It is in its way an exciting moment for a young man when he first receives proof that his seniors, the men of actual achievement and admitted ability, think that there is something in him, that he can be of service to them, that it is in his power, if it be in his will, to emerge from the ruck and take a leading place. Harry was glad for himself; he would have been touched had he spared time to observe how delighted old Neeld was on his account. They made him no gift; they asked work from him, and Iver, true to his traditions and ingrained ideas, asked money as a guarantee for the work. "You give me back what I'm going to pay you," he said, "and since you've taken such an interest in Blinkhampton, turn to and see what you can make of it. It looked as if there was a notion or two worth considering in those plans of yours."

Southend agreed to every suggestion with an emphatic nod. But there was something more in his mind. With every

evidence of capability that Harry showed, even with every increase in the chances of his attaining position and wealth for himself, the prospect of success in the other scheme—the scheme still secret—grew brighter. The thought of that queer little woman Madame Zabriska, Harry's champion, came into his mind. He would have something to tell her, if ever they met again at Lady Evenswood's. He would have something to tell Lady Evenswood herself too. He quite forgot his curry—and Colonel Wilmot Edge, who derived his importance from it.

Nothing was settled ; there were only suggestions for Harry to think over. But he was left quite clear that everything depended on himself alone, that he had only to will and to work, and a career of prosperous activity was before him. The day had more than fulfilled its promise ; what had seemed its great triumph appeared now to be valuable only as an introduction and a prelude to something larger and more real. Already he was looking back with some surprise on the extreme gravity which he had attached to his little Blinkhampton speculation. He grew very readily where he was given room to grow ; and all the while there was the impulse to show himself—and others too—that he did not depend on Blent or on having Blent. Blent or no Blent, he was a man who could make himself felt. He was on his trial still, of course ; but he did not doubt of the verdict. When a thing depended for success or failure on Harry alone, Harry had never been in the habit of doubting the result. The Major had noticed that trait in days which seemed now quite long ago ; the Major had not liked it, but in the affairs of life it probably had some value.

Except for one thing he seemed to be well settled into his new existence. People had stopped staring at him. They had almost ceased to talk of him. He was rapidly becoming a bygone story. Even to himself it seemed months since he had been Tristram of Blent ; he had no idea that any plans were afoot concerning him which found their basis and justification in his having filled that position. Except for one thing he was quit of it all. But that remained, and in such strength as to colour all the new existence. The business of the day had not driven out the visions of the morning. Real things

should drive out fancies; it is serious, perhaps deplorable, when the real things seem to derive at least half their importance from the relation that they bear to the fancies. Perhaps the proper conclusion would be that in such a case the fancies too have their share of reality.

"Neeld and I go down to Fairholme to-morrow, Harry," said Iver as they parted. "No chance of seeing you down there, I suppose?"

Neeld thought the question rather brutal; Iver's feelings were not perhaps of the finest. But Harry was apparently unconscious of anything that grated.

"Really, I don't suppose I shall ever go there again," he answered with a laugh. "Off with the old love, you know, Mr Neeld!"

"Oh, don't say that," protested Southend.

There was a hint of some meaning in his speech which made Harry turn to him with quick attention.

"Blent's a mere memory to me," he declared.

The three elder men were silent, but they seemed to receive what he said with scepticism.

"Well, that's the only way, isn't it?" he asked.

"Just at present, I suppose," Southend said to him in a low voice, as he shook hands.

These few words, with the subdued hint they carried, reinforced the strength of the visions. Harry was rather full of his own will and proud of his own powers just now—perhaps with some little excuse. But he began, thanks to the bearing of these men and to the obstinate thoughts of his own mind, to feel, still dimly, that it was a difficult thing to forget and to get rid of the whole of a life, to make an entirely fresh start, to be quite a different man. Unsuspected chains revealed themselves with each new motion toward liberty. Absolute detachment had been his ideal. He awoke with a start to the fact that he was still, in the main, living with and moving among people who smacked strong of Blent, who had known him as Tristram of Blent, whose lives had crossed his because he was Addie Tristram's son. That was true of even his new acquaintance Lady Evenswood—truer still of Neeld, of Southend, aye, of Sloyd and the Major—most true of his cousin Cecily. This interdependence of its periods is what

welds life into a whole ; even able and wilful young men have, for good and evil, to reckon with it. Otherwise morality would be in a bad case, and even logic rather at sea. The disadvantage is that the difficulties in the way of heroic or dramatic conduct are materially increased.

Yes, he was not to escape, not to forget. That day one scene more awaited him which rose out of Blent and belonged to Blent. The Imp made an appointment by telegram, and the Imp came. Harry could no longer regard his bachelor-chambers as any barrier against the incursions of excited young women. Anything that concerned the Tristrams seemed naturally anti-pathetic to conventions. He surrendered and let Mina in ; that he wanted to see her—her for want of a better—was not recognized by him. She was in a great temper and he was soon inclined to regret his accessibility. Still he endured ; for it was an absolutely final interview, she said. She had just come to tell him what she thought of him—and there was an end of it. Then she was going back to Merrion and she hoped Cecily was coming with her. He—Harry—would not be there anyhow !

" Certainly not," he agreed. " But what's the matter, Madame Zabriska ? You don't complain that I didn't accept—that I couldn't fall in with my cousin's peculiar ideas ? "

" Oh, you can't get out of it like that ! You know that isn't the point."

" What in the world is then ? " cried Harry. " There's nothing else the matter, is there ? "

Mina could hardly sit still for rage ; she was on pins.

" Nothing else ? " She gathered herself together for the attack. " What did you take her to dinner and to the theatre for ? What did you bring her home for ? "

" I wanted to be friendly. I wanted to soften what I had to say."

" To soften it ! Not you ! Shall I tell you what you wanted, Mr Tristram ? Sometimes men seem to know so little about themselves ! "

" If you'll philosophize on the subject of men—about which you know a lot, of course—I'll listen with pleasure."

" It's the horrible selfishness of the thing. Why didn't you

send her away directly? Oh, no, you kept her, you made yourself pleasant, you made her think you liked her——"

"What?"

"You never thought of anything but yourself all the way through. You were lecturing her? Oh, no! You were posing and posturing. Being very fine and very heroic! And then at the end you turned round and—and as good as struck her in the face. Oh, I hope she'll never speak to you again!"

"Did she send you to say this?"

"Of course not."

"Yes, of course not! You're right there. If it had happened to be in any way your business——"

"Ah!" cried the Imp triumphantly. "You've no answer, so you turn round and abuse me! But I don't care. I meant to tell you what I thought of you, and I've done it."

"A post-card would have done it as well," Harry suggested.

"But you've gone too far, oh yes, you have. If you ever change your mind——"

"What about? Oh, don't talk nonsense, Madame Zabriska."

"It's not nonsense. You behaved even worse than I think if you're not at least half in love with her."

Harry threw a quick glance at her.

"That would be very unlucky for me," he remarked.

"Very—now," said the Imp with every appearance of delight.

"London will be dull without you, Madame Zabriska."

"I'm not going to take any more trouble about you, anyhow."

He rose and walked over to her.

"In the end," he said more seriously, "what's your complaint against me?"

"You've made Cecily terribly unhappy."

"I couldn't help it. She—she did an impossible thing."

"After which you made her spend the evening with you! Even a Tristram must have had a reason for that."

"I've told you. I felt friendly and I wanted her to be friendly. And I like her. The whole thing's a ludicrous trifle." He paused a moment and added: "I'm sorry if she's distressed."

" You've made everything impossible—that's all."

" I don't understand. It so happens that to-day all sorts of things have begun to seem possible to me. Perhaps you've seen your uncle ? "

" Yes, I have—and—and it would have been splendid if you hadn't treated her as you did."

" You hint at something I know nothing about." He was growing angry again. " I really believe I could manage my own affairs." He returned to his pet grievance.

" You don't understand ? Well, you will soon." She grew cooler as her mischievous pleasure in puzzling him overcame her wrath. " You'll know what you've done soon."

" Shall I ? How shall I find it out ? "

" You'll be sorry when—when a certain thing happens."

He threw himself into a chair with a peevish laugh.

" I confess your riddles rather bore me. Is there any answer to this one ? "

" Yes, very soon. I've been to see Lady Evenswood."

" She knows the answer, does she ? "

" Perhaps," Her animation suddenly left her. " But I suppose it's all no use now," she said dolefully.

They sat silent for a minute or two, Harry seeming to fall into a fit of abstraction.

" What did you mean by saying I oughtn't to have taken her to dinner and so on ? " he asked, as Mina rose to go.

She shook her head. " I've nothing more to say," she declared.

" And you say I'm half in love with her ? "

" Yes, I do," she snapped viciously as she turned toward the door. But she looked back at him before she went out.

" As far as that goes," he said slowly, " I'm not sure you're wrong, Madame Zabriska. But I could never marry her."

The Imp launched a prophecy, confidently, triumphantly, maliciously.

" Before very long she'll be the one to say that, and you've got yourself to thank for it too ! Good-bye ! "

She was gone. Harry sat down and slowly filled and lit his pipe. It was probably all nonsense ; but again he recollected Cecily's words : " If ever the time comes, I shall remember ! "

Whatever might be the state of his feeling toward her, or of hers toward him, a satisfactory outcome seemed impossible. And somehow this notion had the effect of spoiling the success of the day for Harry Tristram ; so that amongst the Imp's whirling words there was perhaps a grain or two of wisdom. At least his talk with her did not make Harry's visions less constant or less intense.

CHAPTER XXII

An Insult to the Blood

IT could not be denied that Blinkhampton was among the things which arose out of Blent. To acknowledge even so much Harry felt to be a slur on his independence, on the new sense of being able to do things for himself in which his pride, robbed of its old opportunities, was taking refuge and finding consolation. It was thanks to himself anyhow that it had so arisen, for Iver was not the man to mingle business and sentiment. Harry snatched this comfort, and threw his energies into the work, both as a trial of his powers and as a safeguard against his thoughts. He went down to the place and stayed a week. The result of his visit was a report which Iver showed to Southend with a very significant nod ; even the mistakes in it, themselves inevitable from want of experience, were the errors of a large mind. The touch of dogmatism did not displease a man who valued self-confidence above all other qualities.

" The lad will do ; he'll make his way," said Iver.

Southend smiled. Lads who are equal to making their own way may go very far if they are given such a start as he had in contemplation for Harry. But would things go right ? Southend had received an incoherent but decidedly despairing letter from Mina Zabriska. He put it in the fire, saying nothing to Lady Evenswood, and nothing, of course, to Mr Disney. In the end there was perhaps no absolutely necessary connexion between the two parts of the scheme—that which concerned the lady, and that which depended on the Minister. Yet the first would make the second so much more easy !

Mr Disney had given no sign yet. There was a crisis somewhere abroad, and a colleague understood to be self-opinionated ; there was a crisis in the Church, and a bishopric vacant. Lady Evenswood was of opinion that the least attempt to hurry Robert would be fatal. There were, after all, limits to the importance of Harry Tristram's case, and Robert was likely, if worried, to state the fact with his own

merciless vigour, and with that to say good-bye to the whole affair. The only person seriously angry at the Prime Minister's 'dawdling,' was Mina Zabriska; and she had enjoyed no chance of telling him so. To make such an opportunity for her was too hazardous an experiment; it might have turned out well—one could never tell with Robert—but on the whole it was not to be risked.

What Lady Evenswood would not venture, fortune dared. Mina had been seeing sights—it was August now, a suitable month for the task—and one evening, about half-past six, she landed her weary bones on a seat in St James' Park for a few moments' rest before she faced the Underground. The place was very empty, the few people there lay for the most part asleep—workmen with the day's labour done. Presently she saw two men walking slowly toward her from the direction of Westminster. One was tall and slight, handsome and distinguished in appearance; in the other she recognized the rugged awkward man whom she had met at Lady Evenswood's. He was talking hard, hitting his fist into the palm of his other hand sometimes. The handsome man listened with deference, but frowned and seemed troubled. Suddenly the pair stopped.

"I must get back to the House," she heard the handsome man say.

"Well, think it over. Try to see it in that light," said Disney, holding out his hand. The other took it, and then turned away. The episode would have been worth a good paragraph and a dozen conjectures to a reporter; the handsome man was the self-opinionated colleague, and the words Mina had heard, were they not clear proof of dissensions in the Cabinet?

Disney stood stock-still on the path, not looking after his recalcitrant colleague, but down on the ground; his thoughts made him unconscious of things external. Mina glowed with excitement. He was not an awkward man to her; he was a great and surprising fact, a wonderful institution, the more wonderful because (to look at him) he might have been a superior mechanic who had dropped sixpence and was scanning the ground for it. She was really appalled, but her old instinct and habit of interference, of not letting things go by her without laying at least a finger on them, worked in her too.

How long would he stand there motionless ? As if the ground could tell him anything ! Yet she was not impatient of his stillness. It was good to sit and watch him.

An artisan swung by, his tools over his back. Mina saw the suddenly awakened attention with which his head turned to Disney. He slackened pace a moment, and then, after an apparent hesitation, lifted his cap. There was no sign that Disney saw him, save that he touched his hat in almost unconscious acknowledgment. The artisan went by, but stopped, turned to look again, and exchanged an amused smile with Mina. He glanced round twice again before he was out of sight. Mina sighed in enjoyment.

With a quick jerk of his head Disney began to walk on slowly. For an instant Mina did not know what she would do ; the fear and the attraction struggled. Then she jumped up and walked toward him. Her manner tried to assert that she had not noticed him. She was almost by him. She gave a cough. He looked up. Would he know her ? Would he remember asking—no, directing—my lord his secretary to write to her, and had he read what she wrote ? He was looking at her. She dared a hurried little bow. He came to a stand-still again.

" Yes, yes ? " he said questioningly.

" Madame Zabriska, Mr Disney."

" Oh, yes." His voice sounded a little disappointed. " I met you at——? "

" At Lady Evenswood's, Mr Disney." Taking courage she added : " I sent what you wanted ? "

" What I wanted ? "

" Yes. What you wanted me to write, about—about the Tristrams."

" Yes." The voice sounded now as if he had placed her. He smiled a little. " I remember it all now. I read it the other morning." He nodded at her, as if that finished the matter. But Mina did not move. " I'm busy just now," he added, " but—— Well, how's your side of the affair going on, Madame Zabriska ? I've heard nothing from my cousin about that."

" It's just wonderful to see you like this ? " the Imp blurted out.

That amused him ; she saw the twinkle in his eye.

" Never mind me. Tell me about the Tristram cousins."

" Oh, you are thinking of it then ? "

" I never tell what I'm thinking about. That's the only reason people think me clever. The cousins ? "

" Oh, that's all dreadful. At least I believe they are—they would be—in love ; but—but—Mr Tristram's so difficult, so obstinate, so proud. I don't suppose you understand——"

" You're the second person who's told me I can't understand, in the last half-hour." He was smiling now, as he coupled Mina and the handsome recalcitrant colleague in his protest. " I'm not sure of it."

" And she's been silly, and he's been horrid, and just now—well, it's all as bad as can be, Mr Disney."

" Is it ? You must get it better than that, you know, before I can do anything. Good night."

" Oh, stop, do stop ! Do say what you mean ! "

" I shan't do anything of the kind. You may tell Lady Evenswood what I've said and she'll tell you what I mean."

" Oh, but please——"

" If you stop me any longer, I shall send you to the Tower. Tell Lady Evenswood and Southend. If I didn't do my business better than you do yours——! " He shrugged his shoulders with a good-natured rudeness. " Good night," he said again, and this time Mina dared not stop him. Twenty yards further on he halted once more of his own accord and fell into thought. Mina watched him till he moved on again, slowly making his way across the Mall and toward St James' Street. A great thing had happened to her—she felt that ; and she had news too that she was to tell to Southend and Lady Evenswood. There was considerable unsettlement in the Imp's mind that night.

The next day found her at Lady Evenswood's. The old lady and Southend (who had been summoned on Mina's command—certainly Mina was getting up in the world) understood perfectly. They nodded wise heads.

" I was always inclined to think that Robert would take that view."

" He fears that the Bearsdale case won't carry him all the way. Depend upon it, that's what he feels."

"Well, there was the doubt there, you see."

Mina was rather tired of the doubt in the Bearsdale case. It was always cropping up and being mentioned as though it were something exceedingly meritorious.

"And in poor Addie's case, of course, there—well, there wasn't," proceeded Lady Evenswood with a sigh. "So Robert feels that it might be thought——"

"The people with consciences would be at him, I suppose," said Southend scornfully.

"But if the marriage came off——"

"Oh, I see!" cried the Imp.

"Then he would feel able to act. It would look merely like putting things back as they were, you see, Mina."

"Do you think he means the viscounty?" asked Southend.

"It would be so much more convenient. And they could have had an earldom once before if they'd liked."

"Oh, twice," corrected Southend confidently.

"I know it's said, but I don't believe it. You mean in 1816?"

"Yes. Everybody knows that they could have had it from Mr Pitt."

"Well, George, I don't beiieve about 1816. At least my father heard Lord Liverpool say——"

"Oh, dear me!" murmured the Imp. This historical inquiry was neither comprehensible nor interesting. But they discussed it eagerly for some minutes before agreeing that, wherever the truth lay, a viscounty could not be considered out of the way for the Tristrams—legitimate and proper Tristrams, be it understood.

"And that's where the match would be of decisive value," Lady Evenswood concluded.

"Disney said as much evidently. So you understood, Madame Zabriska?"

"I suppose so. I've told you what he said."

"He could take Blentmouth, you know. It's all very simple."

"Well, I'm not sure that our friend Iver isn't keeping that for himself," smiled Southend.

"Oh, he can be Lord Bricks and Putty," she suggested laughing. But there seemed in her words a deplorable hint

of scorn for that process by which the vitality (not to say the solvency) of the British aristocracy is notoriously maintained. " Blentmouth would do very well for Harry Tristram."

" Well then, what's to be done ? " asked Southend.

" We must give him a hint, George."

" Have we enough to go upon ? Suppose Disney turned round and——"

" Robert won't do that. Besides, we needn't pledge anything. We can just put the case." She smiled thoughtfully. " I'm still not quite sure how Mr Tristram will take it, you know."

" How he'll take it ? He'll jump at it, of course."

" The girl or the title, George ? "

" Well, both together. Won't he, Madame Zabriska ? "

Mina thought great things of the girl, and even greater, if vaguer, of the title.

" I should just think so," she replied complacently. There was a limit to the perversity even of the Tristrams.

" We mustn't put it too baldly," observed Southend, dangling his eyeglass.

" Oh, he'll think more of the thing itself than of how we put it," Lady Evenswood declared.

From her knowledge of Harry, the Imp was exactly of that opinion. But Southend was for diplomacy ; indeed what pleasure is there in manœuvring schemes if they are not to be conducted with delicacy ? A policy that can be defined on a postage stamp has no attraction for ingenious minds, although it is usually the most effective with a nation.

Harry Tristram returned from Blinkhampton in a state of intellectual satisfaction marred by a sense of emotional emptiness. He had been very active, very energetic, very successful. He had new and cogent evidence of his power, not merely to start but to go ahead on his own account. This was the good side. But he discovered and tried to rebuke in himself a feeling that he had so far wasted the time in that he had seen nobody and nothing beautiful. Men of affairs had no concern with a feeling like that. Would Iver have it, or would Mr Disney ? Surely not ! It would be a positive inconvenience to them, or at best a worthless asset. He traced it back to Blent, to that influence which he had almost brought himself

to call malign because it seemed in some subtle way enervating, a thing that sought to clog his steps and hung about those feet which had need to be so alert and nimble. Yet the old life at Blent would not have served by itself now. Was he to turn out so exacting that he must have both lives before he, or what was in him, could cry " Content " ? A man will sometimes be alarmed when he realizes what he wants—a woman often.

So he came, in obedience to Lady Evenswood's summons, very confident but rather sombre. When he arrived, a woman was there whom he did not know. She exhaled fashion and the air of being exactly the right thing. She was young—several years short of forty—and very handsome. Her manner was quiet and well-dowered with repressed humour. He was introduced to Lady Flora Disney, and found himself regarded with unmistakable interest and lurking amusement. It was no effort to remember that Mr Disney had married a daughter of Lord Bewdley's. That was enough ; just as he knew all about her, she would know all about him ; they were both of the pale in a sense that their hostess was, but Lord Southend —well, hardly was—and (absurdly enough) Mr Disney himself not at all. This again was in patent incongruity with Blinkhampton and smelt woefully strong of Blent. Lady Evenswood encouraged Harry to converse with the visitor.

" We're a little quieter," she was saying. " The crisis is dormant, and the Bishop's made, and Lord Hove has gone to consult the Duke of Dexminster—which means a fortnight's delay anyhow, and probably being told to do nothing in the end. So I sometimes see Robert at dinner."

" And he tells you things, and you're indiscreet about them ! " said Lady Evenswood rebukingly.

" I believe Robert considers me a sort of ante-room to publicity. And it's so much easier to disown a wife than a journalist, isn't it, Mr Tristram ? "

" Naturally. The Press have to pretend to believe one another," he said, smiling.

" That's the corner-stone," Southend agreed.

" Great is Diana of the Ephesians ! " pursued Lady Flora. " But Diana was never a wife, if I remember."

" Though how they do it, my dear," marvelled Lady Evenswood, " is what I don't understand."

" I know nothing about them," Lady Flora declared. " And they know nothing about me. They stop at my gowns, you know, and even then they always confuse me with Gertrude Melrose."

" I hope that stops at the gown too ? " observed Southend.

" The hair does it, I think. She buys hers at the same shop as I—— Now what do I do, Mr Tristram ? "

" You, Lady Flora ? You know the shop. Is that enough ? "

" Yes, or—well, no. I supplement there. I declare I won't wait any longer for Robert."

" He won't come now," said Lady Evenswood. " Is the Bishop nice, my dear ? "

" Oh, yes, quite plump and gaitery ! Good-bye, dear Cousin Sylvia. I wish you'd come and see me, Mr Tristram."

Harry, making his little bow, declared that he would be delighted.

" I like to see young men sometimes," observed the lady, retreating.

" The new style," Lady Evenswood summed up, as the door closed. " And—well, I suppose Robert likes it."

" *Dissimilia dissimilibus*," shrugged Southend, fixing his glasses.

" It's the only concession to appearances he ever made," sighed Lady Evenswood.

" She's a lady, though."

" Oh, yes. That's what makes it so funny. If she weren't——"

" Yes, it would all be natural enough."

" But we've been wasting your time, Mr Tristram."

" Never less wasted since I was born," protested Harry, who had both enjoyed and learnt.

" No, really I think not," she agreed, smiling. " Flora has her power."

The remark grated on him ; he wanted nothing of Flora and her power ; it was indeed rather an unfortunate introduction to the business of the afternoon ; it pointed Harry's quills a little. Lady Evenswood, with a quick perception, tried to retrieve the observation.

" But she likes people who are independent best," she went

on. " So does Robert, if it comes to that. Indeed he never does a job for anyone."

" Carries that too far in my opinion," commented Southend. The moment for diplomacy approached.

But when it came to the point, Lady Evenswood suavely took the task out of his hands. Her instinct told her that she could do it best ; he soon came to agree. She had that delicacy which he desired but lacked ; she could claim silence when he must have suffered interruption ; she could excuse her interference on the ground of old friendship ; she could plead an interest which might seem impertinent in him. Above all, she could be elusively lucid and make herself understood without any bluntness of statement.

" If it could be so managed that the whole miserable accident should be blotted out and forgotten ! " she exclaimed, as though she implored a personal favour.

" How can that be ? " asked Harry. " I was in, and I am out, Lady Evenswood."

" You're out, and your cousin's in, yes." Harry's eyes noted the words and dwelt on her face. " She can't be happy in that state of affairs, either."

" Perhaps not," he admitted. " Facts are facts, though."

" There are ways—ways of preventing that," Southend interposed, murmuring vaguely.

" I don't know how you'll feel about it, but we all think you ought to consider other things besides your personal preferences. Might I tell Mr Disney—no, one moment, please ! Our idea, I mean, was that there might be a family arrangement. A moment please, Mr Tristram ! I don't mean, by which she would lose what she has——"

" But that I should get it ? "

" Well, yes. Oh, I know your feelings. But they would cease to exist if you came to her on an equality, with what is really and truly your proper position recognized and—and——"

" Regularized," Southend supplied with a sharp glance at Harry.

" I don't understand," Harry declared. " You must tell me what you mean. Is it something that concerns Cecily as well as me ? "

" Oh, about that we haven't the right even to ask your

feelings. That would be simply for you to consider. But if anything were to happen——"

"Nothing could." Harry restrained himself no longer. "There can be no question of it."

"I knew you'd feel like that. Just because you feel like that, I want to make the other suggestion to you. I'm not speaking idly. I have my warrant, Mr Tristram. If——" She was at a loss for a moment. "If you ever went back to Blent," she continued, not satisfied, but driven to some form of words, "it isn't inevitable that you should go as Mr Tristram. There are means of righting such injustices as yours. Wait, please! It would be felt—and felt in a quarter you can guess—that the master of Blent, which you'd be in fact anyhow, should have that position recognized. Perhaps there would not be the same feeling unless you were still associated with Blent."

"I don't understand at all."

She exchanged a despairing glance with Southend; she could not tell whether or not he was sincere in saying that he did not understand. Southend grew weary of the diplomacy, which he had advocated; after all it had turned out to be Lady Evenswood's, not his, which may have had something to do with his change of mood toward it. He took up the task with a brisk directness.

"It's like this, Harry. You remember that the unsuccessful claimant in the Bearsdale case got a barony? That's our precedent. But it's felt not to go quite all the way—because there was a doubt there. [Luckily for Mina she was not by to hear.] But it is felt that in the event of the two branches of your family being united it would be proper to—to obliterate past—er—incidents. And that could be done by raising you to the peerage, under a new and, as we hope, a superior title. We believe Mr Disney would, under the circumstances I have suggested, be prepared to recommend a viscounty, and that there would prove to be no difficulties in the way." The last words had, presumably, reference to the same quarter that Lady Evenswood had once described by the words: "Somebody Else."

They watched him as he digested the proposal, at last made to him in a tolerably plain form. "You must give me a moment

to follow that out," he said with a smile. But he had it all clear enough before he would allow them to perceive that he understood. For although his brain made easy work of it, his feelings demanded a pause. He was greatly surprised. He had thought of no such a thing. What differences would it make ?

Southend was well satisfied with the way in which his overture was received. Lady Evenswood was watching intently.

" The idea is——" said Harry slowly—" I mean—I don't quite gather what it is. You talk of my cousin, and then of a viscounty. The two go together, do they ? "

It was rather an awkward question put as bluntly as that.

" Well, that did seem to be Mr Disney's view," said Southend.

" He was thinking of the family—of the family as a whole. I'm sure you think of that too," urged Lady Evenswood. There would never be a Tristram who did not, she was thinking. Well, except Addie perhaps, who really thought of nothing. " Of course as a thing purely personal to you it might be just a little difficult." She meant, and intended Harry to understand, that without the marriage the thing could not be done at all. Mina had reported Mr Disney faithfully, and Lady Evenswood's knowledge of her cousin Robert was not at fault. " Apart from anything else, there would be the sordid question," she ended, with a smile that became propitiatory against her will ; she had meant it to be merely confidential.

There was ground for hope ; Harry hesitated—truth will out, even where it impairs the grandeur of men. The suggestion had its attractions ; it touched the spring of the picturesque in him which Blinkhampton had left resting in idleness. It suggested something in regard to Cecily too—what it was, he did not reason out very clearly at the moment. Anyhow what was proposed would create a new situation and put him in a different position toward her. In brief, he would have something more on his side.

" Once he was sure the proposal was agreeable to you——" murmured Lady Evenswood gently. She was still very tentative about the matter, and still watchful of Harry.

But Southend was not cautious or did not read his man so

well. To him the battle seemed to be won. He was assured in his manner and decidedly triumphant as he said :

" It's a great thing to have screwed Disney up to the viscounty. It does away with all difficulty about the name, you see."

Harry looked up sharply. Had Mr Disney been ' screwed up ' ? Who had screwed him up ?—by what warrant ?—on whose commission ? That was enough to make him glower and to bring back something of the old-time look of suspicion to his face. But the greater part of his attention was engrossed by the second half of Southend's ill-advised bit of jubilation.

" The name ? The difficulty about the name ? " he asked.

" If it had been a barony—well, hers would take precedence of course. With the higher degree yours will come first, and her barony be merged—Viscount Blentmouth, eh, Harry ? " He chuckled with glee.

" Viscount Blentmouth be hanged ! " cried Harry. He mastered himself with an effort. " I beg your pardon, Lady Evenswood ; and I'm much obliged to you, and to you too, Lord Southend, for—for screwing Mr Disney up. It's not a thing I could or should have done or tried to do for myself." In spite of his attempted calmness his voice grew a little louder. " I want nothing but what's my own. If nothing's my own, well and good—I can wait till I make it something."

" But, my dear Harry——! " began the discomfited Southend. Harry cut him short, breaking again into impetuous speech.

" There's nothing between my cousin and me. There's no question of marriage and never can be. And if there were——" He seemed to gather himself up for a flight of scorn—" If there were, do you think I'm going to save my own pride by saddling the family with a beastly new viscounty ? "

His tones rose in indignation on the last sentence, as he looked from one to the other. " Viscount Blentmouth indeed ! " he growled.

Southend's hands were out before him in signal of bewildered distress. Lady Evenswood looked at Harry, then, with a quick forward inclination of her body, past him ; and she began to laugh.

" Thank you very much, but I've been Tristram of Blent,"

ended Harry, now in a very fine fume, and feeling he had been much insulted.

Still looking past him, Lady Evenswood sat laughing quietly. Even on Southend's face came an uneasy smile, as he too looked toward the door. After a moment's furious staring at the two Harry faced round. The door had been softly and noiselessly opened to the extent of a couple of feet. A man stood in the doorway, tugging at a ragged beard and with eyes twinkling under rugged brows. Who was he, and how did he come there? Harry heard Lady Evenswood's laughter; he heard her murmur to herself with an accent of pleasure: "A beastly new viscounty!" Then the man in the doorway came a little further in, saying:

"That's exactly what I think about it, Mr Tristram. I've heard what you said and I agree with you. There's an end, then, of the beastly new viscounty!" He looked mockingly at Southend. "I've been screwed up all for nothing, it seems," said he.

"Why, you're——?"

"Let me introduce myself, Mr Tristram. I came to look for my wife, and my name is Disney. I intend to keep mine, and I know better than to try to alter yours."

"I thought it would end like this!" cried Lady Evenswood.

"Shan't we say that it begins like this?" asked Mr Disney. His look at Harry was a compliment.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Decree of Banishment

THE Imp cried—absolutely cried for vexation—when a curt and sour note from Southend told her the issue. The blow struck down her excitement and her exultation. Away went all joy in her encounter with Mr Disney, all pride in the skill with which she had negotiated with the Prime Minister. The ending was pitiful—disgusting and pitiful. She poured out her heart's bitterness to Major Duplay, who had come to visit her.

" I'm tired of the whole thing, and I hate the Tristrams ! " she declared.

" It always comes to that in time, Mina, when you mix yourself up in people's affairs."

" Wasn't it through you that I began to do it ? "

The Major declined to argue the question—one of some complexity perhaps.

" Well, I've got plenty to do in London. Let's give up Merrion and take rooms here."

" Give up Merrion ! " She was startled. But the reasons she assigned were prudential. " I've taken it till October, and I can't afford to. Besides, what's the use of being here in August ? "

" You won't drop it yet, you see." The reasons did not deceive Duplay.

" I don't think I ought to desert Cecily. I suppose she'll go back to Blent. Oh, what an exasperating man he is ! "

" Doesn't look as if the match would come off now, does it ? "

" It's just desperate. The last chance is gone. I don't know what to do."

" Marry him yourself," advised the Major. Though it was an old idea of his, he was not very serious.

" I'd sooner poison him," said Mina decisively. " What must Mr Disney think of me ? "

" I shouldn't trouble about that. Do you suppose he thinks

much at all, Mina ? " (That is the sort of remark which relatives sometimes regard as consolatory.) " I think Harry Tristram as much of a fool as you do," Duplay added. " If he'd taken it, he could have made a good match anyhow, even if he didn't get Lady Tristram."

" Cecily's just as bad. She's retired into her shell. You don't know that way of her's—of theirs, I suppose it is, bother them ! She's treating everybody and everything as if they didn't exist."

" She'll go back to Blent, I suppose ? "

" Well, she must. Somebody must have it."

" If it's going begging, call on me," said the Major equably. He was in a better humour with the world than he had been for a long while ; his connexion with Iver promised well. But Mina sniffed scornfully : she was in no mood for idle jests.

Cecily had been told about the scheme and its lamentable end. Her attitude was one of entire unconcern. What was it to her if Harry were made a viscount, a duke, or the Pope ? What was anything to her ? She was going back to her father at Blent. The only animation she displayed was in resenting the reminder, and indeed denying the fact, that she had ever been other than absolutely happy and contented at Blent. Mina pressed the point, and Cecily then declared that now at any rate her conscience was at rest. She had tried to do what was right—at what sacrifice Mina knew ; the reception of her offer Mina knew. Now perhaps Mina could sympathize with her, and could understand the sort of way in which Cousin Harry received attempts to help him. On this point they drew together again.

" You must come back to Merrion, dear," urged Cecily.

Mina, who never meant to do anything else, embraced her friend and affectionately consented. It is always pleasant to do on entreaty what we might be driven to do unasked.

Good-bye had to be said to Lady Evenswood. That lady was very cheerful about Harry ; she was, hardly with any disguise, an admirer of his conduct, and said that undoubtedly he had made a very favourable impression on Robert. She seemed to make little of the desperate condition of affairs as regarded Cecily. She was thinking of Harry's career, and that seemed to her very promising. " Whatever he tries I think he'll

succeed in," she said. That was not enough for Mina; he must try Mina's things—those she had set her heart on—before she could be content. "But you never brought Cecily to see me," Lady Evenswood complained. "And I'm just going away now."

That was it, Mina decided. Lady Evenswood had not seen Cecily. She had approached the Tristram puzzle from one side only, and had perceived but one aspect of it. She did not understand that it was complex and double-headed; it was neither Harry nor Cecily, but Harry and Cecily. Mina had been in that state of mind before Cecily came on the scene; it was natural now in Lady Evenswood. But it rendered her really useless. It was a shock to find that, all along, in Lady Evenswood's mind Cecily had been a step toward the peerage rather than the peerage the first step toward Cecily. Mina wondered loftily (but silently) how woman could take so slighting a view of woman.

"And Flora Disney has quite taken him up," Lady Evenswood pursued. "George tells me he's been to lunch there twice. George is a terrible gossip."

"What does Lady Flora Disney want with him?"

"Well, my dear, are you going to turn round and say you don't understand why he interests women?"

"I don't see why he should interest Lady Flora." Mina had already made up her mind that she hated that sort of woman. It was bad enough to have captured Mr Disney; must the insatiate creature draw into her net Harry Tristram also?

"And of course he's flattered. Any young man would be."

"I don't think he's improved since he left Blent."

"Country folks always say that about their young men when they come to town," smiled Lady Evenswood. "He's learning his world, my dear. And he seems very sensible. He hasn't inherited poor Addie's wildness."

"Yes, he has. But it only comes out now and then. When it does——"

"It won't come out with Flora," Lady Evenswood interrupted reassuringly. "And at any rate, as you may suppose, I'm going to leave him to his own devices. Oh, I think he's quite right, but I don't want to be wrong myself again, that's all."

But another thing was to happen before Mina went back to the valley of the Blent; a fearful, delightful thing. An astonishing missive came—a card inviting her to dine with Mr and Lady Flora Disney. She gasped as she read it. Had Lady Flora ever indulged in the same expression of feeling, it would have been when she was asked to send it. Gasping still, Mina telegraphed for her best frock and all the jewelled tokens of affection which survived to testify to Adolf Zabriska's love. It was in itself an infinitely great occasion, destined always to loom large in memory; but it proved to have a bearing on the Tristram problem too.

For Harry was there. He sat on the hostess's left; on her other side was handsome Lord Hove, very resplendent in full dress, starred and ribanded. Several of the men were like that; there was some function later on, Mina learnt from an easy-mannered youth who sat by her and seemed bored with the party. Disney came in late, in his usual indifferently fitting morning clothes, snatching an hour from the House, in the strongest contrast to the fair sumptuousness of his wife. He took a vacant chair two places from Mina and nodded at her in a friendly way. They were at a round table, and there were only a dozen there. The easy-mannered youth told her all about them, including several things which it is to be hoped were not true; he seemed to view them from an altitude of good-humoured contempt. Mina discovered afterward that he was a cousin of Lady Flora's, and occupied a position in Messrs Coutts' Bank. He chuckled once, remarking:

"Flora's talkin' to Tristram all the time, instead of bein' pleasant to Tommy Hove. Fact is, she hates Tommy, and she'd be glad if the Chief would give him the boot. But the Chief doesn't want to, because Tommy's well in at Court and the Chief isn't."

"Why does Lady Flora hate Lord Hove? He's very handsome."

"Think so? Well, I see so many fellows like that, that I'm beginnin' to hate 'em. Like the 'sweet girl,' don't you know? I hear the Chief thinks Tristram'll train on."

"Do what?" asked Mina absently, looking across at Harry. Harry was quite lively, and deep in conversation with his hostess.

" Well, they might put him in the House, and so on, you know. See that woman next but three ? That's Gertrude Melrose ; spends more on clothes than any woman in London, and she's only got nine hundred a year. Queer ? " He smiled as he consumed an almond.

" She must get into debt," said Mina, gazing at the clothes of inexplicable origin.

" Gettin' in isn't the mystery," remarked the youth. " It's the gettin' out, Madame—er—Zabriska." He had taken a swift glance at Mina's card.

Mina looked round. " Is it in this room they have the Councils ? " she asked.

" Cabinets ? Don't know. Downstairs somewhere, I believe, anyhow." He smothered a yawn. " Queer thing, that about Tristram, you know. If everything was known, you know, I shouldn't wonder if a lot of other fellows found themselves——"

He was interrupted, fortunately perhaps, in these speculations by a question from his other neighbour. Mina was left alone for some minutes, and set to work to observe the scene. She was tolerably at ease now ; a man was on each side of her, and in the end it was the women of whom she was afraid. There would be a terrible time in the drawing-room, but she determined not to think of that. Harry saw her sitting silent and smiled across at her while he listened to Lady Flora. The smile seemed to come from a great way off. The longer she sat there the more that impression grew ; he seemed so much and so naturally a part of the scene and one of the company. She was so emphatically not one of them, save by the merest accident and for an evening's span. The sense of difference and distance troubled her. She thought of Cecily alone at home, and grew more troubled still. She felt absurd too, because she had been trying to help Harry. If that had to be done, she supposed Lady Flora would do it now. The idea was bitter. Where difference of class comes in, women seem more hostile to one another than men are to men ; perhaps this should be considered in relation to the Franchise Question.

Through the talk of the rest she listened to Harry and Lady Flora. That Harry should hold his own did not surprise her ; it was rather unexpected that he should do it so lightly and so

urbanely. Lord Hove tried to intervene once or twice, with no success; capricious waves of sympathy undulated across to him from Mina. She turned her head by chance, and found Mr Disney silent too, and looking at her. The next moment he spoke to the easy-mannered youth.

"Well, Theo, what's the world saying and doing?"

"Same as last year, Cousin Robert," answered Theo cheerfully. "Government's a year older, of course."

In an instant Mina was pleased; she detected an unexpected but pleasant friendship between Mr Disney and the youth. She credited Disney with more humanity—the humour necessary she knew he had—and liked him even better.

"The drawing-rooms have kicked us out already, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, rather. But the Bank's not sure."

"Good! That's something. Banks against drawing-rooms for me, Madame Zabriska." He brought her into the conversation almost with tact; he must have had a strong wish to make her comfortable.

"That's right," announced Theo. "I should say you're all right in the country too. Crops pretty good, you know, and the rain's comin' down just nicely."

"Well, I ordered it," said Mr Disney.

"Takin' all the credit you can get," observed Theo. "Like the man who carved his name on the knife before he stabbed his mother-in-law."

"What did he do that for?" cried Mina. A guffaw from Disney quite amazed her.

Harry looked across with a surprised air; he seemed to wonder that she should be enjoying herself. Mina was annoyed, and set herself to be merry; a glance from Lady Flora converted vexation into rage. She turned back to Theo; somehow Mr Disney had taught her how to like him—often a valuable lesson, if people would keep their eyes open for it.

"Everybody else I've met has been horribly afraid of Mr Disney," she said in a half-whisper.

"Oh, you aren't in a funk of a man who's smacked your head!"

That seemed a better paradox than most. Mina nodded approvingly.

" What does the Bank say about Barililand, Theo ? " called Disney. Lord Hove paused in the act of drinking a glass of wine.

" Well, they're just wonderin' who's goin' to do the kickin'," said Theo.

" And who's going to take it ? " Disney seemed much amused. Lord Hove had turned a little pink. Mina had a vague sense that serious things were being joked about. Harry had turned from his hostess and was listening.

" That's what it comes to," concluded Theo.

Disney glanced round, smiling grimly. Everybody had become silent. Barililand had produced the question on which Lord Hove was supposed to be restive. Disney laughed and looked at his wife. She rose from the table. Mr Disney had either learnt what he wanted or had finished amusing himself. Mina did not know which ; no more, oddly enough, did Lord Hove.

Mr Disney was by the door, saying good-bye to the ladies ; he would not be coming to the drawing-room. He stopped Mina, who went out last, just before his wife.

" We've done all we could, Madame Zabriska," he said. " We must leave him alone, eh ? "

" I'm afraid so. You've been very kind, Mr Disney."

" Better as it is, I fancy. Now then, Flora ! " At this peremptory summons Lady Flora left Theo, by whom she had halted, and followed Mina through the door.

The dreadful moment had come. It justified Mina's fears, but not in the way she had expected. Two of the women left directly ; the other two went off into a corner ; her hostess sat down and talked to her. Lady Flora was not distant and did not make Mina feel an outsider. The fault was the other way ; she was confidential—and about Harry. She assumed an intimacy with him equal or more than equal to Mina's own ; she even told Mina things about him ; she said ' we ' thought him an enormous acquisition, and hoped to see a great deal of him. It was all very kind, and Mina, as a true friend, should have been delighted. As it was, dolour grew upon her.

" And I suppose the cousin is quite——? " A gentle motion of Lady Flora's fan was left to define Cecily more exactly, and proved fully up to the task.

" She's the most fascinating creature I ever saw," cried Mina.

" Rescued out of Chelsea, wasn't she ? " smiled Lady Flora. " Poor thing ! One's sorry for her. When her mourning's over we must get her out. I do hope she's something like Mr Tristram ? "

" I think she's ever so much nicer than Mr Tristram." Mina would have shrunk from stating this upon oath.

" He interests me enormously, and it's so seldom I like Robert's young men."

So he was to be Robert's young man too ! The thing grew worse and worse. Almost she hated her idol Mr Disney. Personal jealousy, and jealousy for Cecily, blinded her to his merits, much more to the gracious cordiality which his wife was now showing.

" Yes, I'm sure we shall make something of Harry Tristram."

" He doesn't like things done for him," Mina declared. She meant to show how very well she knew him, and spoke with an air of authority.

" Oh, of course it won't look like that, Madame Zabriska."

Now the Imp's efforts had looked like that—just like it. She chafed under conscious inferiority ; Lady Flora had smiled at being thought to need such a reminder.

" Men never see it unless it's absolutely crammed down their throats," Lady Flora pursued. " They always think it's all themselves, you know. It would be very clumsy to be found out."

In perfect innocence she sprinkled pepper on Mina's wound. Able to endure no more, the Imp declared that she must go back to Cecily.

" Oh, poor girl, I quite forgot her ! You're going back to Blent with her, I suppose ? Do come and see us when you're in town again." Was there or was there not the slightest sigh as she turned away, a sigh that spoke of duty nobly done ? Even toward Robert's caprices, even to the oddest people, Lady Flora prided herself on a becoming bearing. And in the end this little Madame Zabriska had rather amused her ; she was funny with her airs of ownership about Harry Tristram.

Well poor Mina understood ! All that the enemy thought was legible to her ; all the misery that keen perceptions can sometimes bring was sure to be hers. She had spent the most

notable evening of her life, and she got into her cab a miserable woman.

Theo was on the doorstep. "Escapin'," he confided to her while he handed her in. "Worst of these parties generally is that there's nobody amusin'," he observed as he did her this service. "Aren't you rather glad you haven't got to take on Flora's job, Madame Zabriska?"

No, at the moment at least Mina did not rejoice on that account.

When she reached home, there was nothing to change her mood. She found Cecily in a melancholy so sympathetic as to invite an immediate outpouring of the heart. Cecily was beautiful that evening, in her black frock, with her fair hair, her pale face, and her eyes full of tragedy. She had been writing, it appeared; ink and paper were on the table. She was very quiet, but, Mina thought, with the stillness that follows a storm. Unasked, the Imp sketched the dinner-party, especially Harry's share in it. Her despair was laced with vitriol and she avoided a kind word about anybody. This was blank ingratitude to Mr Disney, and to Theo too; but our friends can seldom escape from paying for our misfortunes.

"Those people have got hold of him. We've lost him. That's the end of it," she cried.

Cecily had nothing to say; she leant back in a limp forlornness while Mina expatiated on this doleful text. There came a luxury into the Imp's woe as she realized for herself and her auditor the extreme sorrows of the situation; she forgot entirely that there was not and never had been any reason why Harry should be anything in particular to her at least. She observed that of course she was glad for his sake; this time-honoured unselfishness won no assent from Cecily. Lacking the reinforcement of discussion, the stream of Mina's lamentation began to run dry.

"Oh, it no use talking," she ended. "There it is!"

"I'm going back to Blent to-morrow," said Cecily suddenly.

It was no more than Mina had expected. "Yes, we may as well," she assented dismally.

Cecily rose and began to walk about. Her air caught Mina's attention again; on this, the evening before she returned to Blent, it had something of that suppressed passion which had

marked her manner on the night when she determined to leave it. She came to a stand opposite Mina.

" I've made up my mind. From this moment, Mina, Blent is mine. Up to now I've held it for Harry. Now it's mine. I shall go back and begin everything there to-morrow."

Mina felt the tragedy ; the inevitable was being accepted.

" You see I've been writing ? "

" Yes, Cecily." After all it looked as though the Imp were not to be cheated of her sensation.

" I've written to Cousin Harry. I've told him what I mean to do. He must think it right ; it's the only thing he's left me to do. But I've told him I can do it only on one condition. He'll have my letter to-morrow."

" On one condition ? What ? "

" I said to him that he gave me Blent because I was there, because he saw me there in the middle of it all. That's true. If I'd stayed here, would he ever have told his secret ? Never ! He wouldn't so much as have come to see me ; he'd never have thought of me, he'd have forgotten all about me. It was seeing me there."

" Well, seeing you, anyhow."

" Seeing me there—there at Blent," she insisted, now almost angrily. " So he'll understand what I mean by the thing I've asked of him. And he must obey." Her voice became imperious. " I've told him that I'm going back, going to stay there, and live there, but that he must never, never come there."

Mina started, her eyes wide-open in surprise at this heroic measure.

" I must never see him—if I can help it. Anyhow I must never see him at Blent. That's the only way I can endure it."

" Never see him ! Never have him at Blent ! " Mina was trying to sort out the state of things which would result. It was pretty plain what had happened ; Cecily had felt the need of doing something ; here it was. Mina's sympathies, quick to move, darted out to Harry. " Think what it'll mean to him never to see Blent ! " she cried.

" To him ? Nothing, nothing ! Why, you yourself came home just now saying that we were nothing to him ! Blent's

nothing to him now. It's for my own sake that I've said he mustn't come."

"You've begged him not to come?"

"I've told him not to come," said Cecily haughtily. "If it's his, let him take it. If it's mine, I can choose who shall come there. Don't you see, don't you see? How can I ever cheat myself into thinking it's mine by right, if I see Harry there?" She paused a moment. "And if you'd thrown yourself at a man's head, and he'd refused you, would you want to have him about?"

"N—no," said Mina, but rather hesitatingly; uncomfortable situations are to some natures better than no situations at all. "No, of course not," she added more confidently, after she had spent a moment in bracing up her sense of what was seemly.

"So, I've ended it, I've ended everything. I posted my letter just before you came in, and he'll get it to-morrow. And now, Mina, I'm going back to Blent." She threw herself into an armchair, leaning back in a sudden weariness after the excited emotion with which she had declared her resolve. Mina sat on the other side of the table looking at her, and after a moment's looking suddenly began to sob.

"It's too miserable," she declared in wrathful woe. "Why couldn't he have said nothing about it and just married you? Oh, I hate it all, because I love you both. I know people think I'm in love with him, but I'm not. It's both of you, it's the whole thing; and now it never, never can go straight. If he got Blent back now by a miracle, it would be just as bad."

"Worse," said Cecily, "if you mean that then he might——"

"Yes, worse," moaned Mina. "It's hopeless every way. And I believe he's fond of you."

A scornful smile was Cecily's only but sufficient answer.

"And you love him!" Mina's sorrow made her forget all fear. She said in this moment what she had never before dared to say. "Oh, of course you do, or you'd never have told him he mustn't come to Blent. But he won't understand that—and it would make no difference if he did, I suppose! Oh, you Tristrams!" Again her old despairing cry of revolt and bewilderment was wrung from her by the ways of the family with whose fate she had become so concerned. Southend had felt much the same thing over the matter of Harry and

the viscounty. "So it all ends, it all ends—and we've got to go back to Blent!"

"Yes, I love him," said Cecily. "That evening in the Long Gallery—the evening when he gave me Blent—do you know what I thought?" She spoke low and quickly, lying back quite still in the attitude that Addie Tristram had once made her own. "I watched him, and I saw that he had something to say, and yet wouldn't say it. I saw he was struggling. And I watched, how I watched! He was engaged to Janie Iver—he had told me that. But he didn't love her—yes, he told me that too. But there was something else. I saw it. I had come to love him then already—oh, I think as soon as I saw him at Blent. And I waited for it. Did you ever do that, Mina—do you remember?"

Mina was silent; her memories gave her no such thing as that. Her sobs had ceased; she sat listening in tense excitement to the history of the scene that she had descried, dim and far off, from the terrace of Merrion on the hill.

"I waited, waited. I couldn't believe—— Ah, yes, but I did believe. I thought he felt bound in honour and I hoped—yes, I hoped—he would break his word and throw away his honour. I saw it coming, and my heart seemed to burst as I waited for it. You'd know, if it had ever happened to you like that. And at last I saw he would speak—I saw he must speak. He came and stood by me. Suddenly he cried, 'I can't do it.' Then my heart leapt, because I thought he meant he couldn't marry Janie Iver. I looked up at him and I suppose I said something. He caught me by the arm. I thought he was going to kiss me, Mina. And then—then he told me that Blent was mine—not himself but Blent—that I was Lady Tristram, and he—Harry Nothing—he said, Harry Nothing-at-all."

"Oh, if you'd tell him that!" cried Mina.

"Tell him!" She smiled in superb scorn. "I'd die before I told him. I could go and offer myself to him just because he didn't know. And he'll never know now. Only now you can understand that Blent is—— Ah, that it's all bitterness to me! And you know now why he must never come. Yes, as you say, it all ends now."

Mina came and knelt down by her, caressing her hand.

Cecily shivered a little and moved with a vague air of discomfort.

" But I believe he cares for you," Mina whispered.

" He might have cared for me perhaps. But Blent's between."

Blent was between. The difficulty seemed insuperable—at least where you were dealing with Tristrams. Mina could not but acknowledge that. For Harry, having nothing to give, would take nothing. And Cecily, having much, was thereby debarred from giving anything. And if that miracle of which Mina had spoken came about, the parts would be exchanged but the position would be no more hopeful. The Tristrams not only brought about difficult situations—as Addie had done here—but by being what they were they ensured that the difficulties should not be overcome. Yet at this moment Mina could not cry : " Oh, you Tristrams ! " any more. Her sorrow was too great, and Cecily too beautiful. She seemed again to see Addie, and neither she nor anybody else could have been hard to Addie. She covered Cecily's hands with kisses as she knelt by her side.

" Yes, this is the end," said Cecily. " Now, Mina, for Blent and her ladyship ! " She gave a bitter little laugh. " And good-bye to Cousin Harry ! "

" Oh, Cecily——! "

" No, he shall never come to Blent."

How would Harry take this decree of banishment ? Mina looked up into her friend's eyes, wondering. But did not the dinner-party at Mr Disney's answer that ?

CHAPTER XXIV

After the End of All

MY DEAR COUSIN—I shall faithfully obey your commands—Yours very truly, H. A. F. TRISTRAM." And below—very formally—" THE LADY TRISTRAM OF BLENT."

To write it took him no more than a moment—even though he wrote first, " The commands of the Head of the House," and destroyed that, ashamed of the sting of malice in it. To send it to the post was the work of another moment. The third found him back at his Blinkhampton plans and elevations, Cecily's letter lying neglected on the table by him. After half an hour's work he stopped suddenly, reached for the letter, tore it into small fragments, and flung the scraps into his waste-paper basket. Just about the same time Cecily and Mina were getting into the train to return to Blent.

This returning to Blent was epidemic—not so strange perhaps, since mid-August was come, and only the people who had to stayed in town. Harry met Duplay over at Blinkhampton ; Duplay was to join his niece at Merrion in about ten days. He ran against Iver in the street ; Iver was off to Fairholme by the afternoon train ; Mr Neeld, he mentioned, was coming to stay with him for a couple of weeks on Friday. Even Southend—whom Harry encountered in Whitehall, very hot and exhausted—cursed London and talked of a run down to Iver's. Blentmouth, Fairholme, Iver's, Merrion—they all meant Blent. Cecily had gone, and Mina ; the rest were going there—everybody except the man who three months ago had looked to spend his life there as its master.

And business will grow slack when autumn arrives ; it is increasingly difficult for a man to bury himself in deeds, or plans, or elevations, or calculations, when everybody writes that he is taking his vacation, and that the matter shall have immediate attention on his return. Harry grew terribly tired of this polite formula. He wanted to build Blinkhampton out of hand, in the months of August and September. The

work would have done him good service. He was seeking a narcotic.

For he was in pain. It came on about a week after he had sent his curt acknowledgment of Cecily's letter, laying hold of him, he told himself, just because he had nothing to do, because everybody was taking his holiday, and Blinkhampton would not get itself bought, and sold, and contracted for, and planned, and laid out, and built. The politicians were at it still, for two more hot, weary, sultry weeks, but they were of little use. Lady Flora had fled to Scotland, Disney was smothered in arrears of work which must be made up before he got a rest. London was full of strange faces and outlandish folk. "I must take a holiday myself," said Harry in a moment of seeming inspiration. Where, where, where? He suffered under the sensation of having nowhere whither he would naturally go, no home, no place to which he could return as to his own. He found himself wishing that he had not torn up Cecily's letter; he remembered its general effect so well that he wanted to read the very words again, in the secret hope that they would modify and soften his memory. His own answer met and destroyed the hope; he knew that he would have responded to anything friendly, had it been there.

Yet what did the letter mean? He interpreted it as Cecily had declared he would. When he held Blent, he held it in peace of mind, though in violation of law, till one came who reproached him in a living body and with speaking eyes; faced with that, he could find no comfort in Blent. Cecily violated no law, but she violated nature, the natural right in him. To her then his presence would be intolerable, and she could not find the desperate refuge that he had chosen. Her only remedy was to forbid him the place. Her instinct drove her to that, and the instinct so well understood by him, so well known, was to him reason enough. She could not feel mistress of Blent while he was there.

Indeed he had not meant to go. He had told Iver that in perfect good faith. It would have been in bad taste for him to think of going—of going anything like so soon as this. Whence then came his new feeling of desolation and of hurt? It was partly that he was forbidden to go. It was hard to realize that he could see Blent now only by another's will or sufferance.

It was even more that now it was no question of refraining from going at once, in order to go hereafter with a better grace. He awoke to the idea that he was never to go, and in the same moment to the truth that he had always imagined himself going again, that Blent had always held a place in his picture of the future, that whatever he was doing or achieving or winning, there it was in the background. Now it was there no more. He could almost say with Mina and with Cecily herself: "This is the end of it."

What then of the impressions Mina had gathered from Mr Disney's dinner-party? It can only be said that when people of impressionable natures study others of like temperament they should not generalize from their conduct at parties. In society dinners are eaten in disguise, sometimes intentional, sometimes unconscious, but as a rule quite impenetrable. If Harry's had been unconscious, if the mood had played the man, the deception was the more complete.

He went to see Lady Evenswood one day; she had sent to express her desire for a talk before she fled to the country. She had much that was pleasant to say, much of the prospects of his success, of his 'training-on,' as easy-mannered Theo had put it to Mina Zabriska.

"And if you do, you'll be able to think now that you've done it all off your own bat," she ended.

"You've found out my weaknesses, I see," he laughed.

"Oh, I doubt if there's any such thing as an absolute strength or an absolute weakness. They're relative. What's an advantage in one thing is a disadvantage in another."

"I understand," he smiled. "My confounded conceit may help me on in the world, but it doesn't make me a grateful friend or a pleasant companion?"

"I believe George Southend agrees as far as the grateful friend part of it is concerned. And I'm told Lord Hove does as to the rest. But then it was only Flora Disney herself who said so."

"And what do you say?"

"Oh, pride's intolerable in anybody except a lover," she declared.

"Well, I've known lovers too humble. I told one so once; he believed me, went in, and won."

" You gave him courage, not pride, Mr Tristram."

" Perhaps that's true. He's very likely got the pride by now." He smiled at his thoughts of Bob Broadley.

" And you've settled down in the new groove ? " she asked.

He hesitated a moment. " Oh, nearly. Possibly there's still a touch of the ' Desdichado,' about me. His would be the only shield I could carry, you see."

" Stop ! Well, I forgive you. You're not often bitter about that. But you're very bitter about something, Mr Tristram."

" I want to work, and nobody will in August. You can't get the better of your enemies if they're with their families at Margate or in the Engadine."

" Oh, go down and stay at Blent. No, I'm serious. You say you're proud. There's a good way of showing good pride. Go and stay in the very house. If you do that, I shall think well of you—and even better than I think now of the prospects."

" I've not been invited."

" Poor girl, she's afraid to invite you ! Write and say you're coming."

" She'd go away. Yes, she would. She consents to live there only on condition that I never come. She's told me so."

" I'm too old a woman to know your family ! You upset the wisdom of ages, and I haven't time to learn anything new."

" I'm not the least surprised. If I were in her place, I should hate to have her there."

" Nonsense. In a month or two——"

" If anything's certain, it's that I shall never go to Blent as long as my cousin owns it."

" I call it downright wicked."

" We share the crime, she and I. She lays down the law, I willingly obey."

" Willingly ? "

" My reason is convinced. Maybe I'm a little homesick. But your month or two will serve the purpose there."

" There's a great deal more in this than you're telling me, Mr Tristram."

" Put everything you can imagine into it, and the result's the same."

She sighed and sat for a moment in pensive silence. Harry seemed to ponder too.

" I'm going to think of nothing but my work," he announced.

" So many young men in their early twenties succeed in that ! " she murmured mockingly.

" Don't those who succeed in anything succeed in that ? "

" Not all, happily—and none would if they were your mother's sons. My dear boy, just open a window in you anywhere—I know you keep them shut when you can—but just open even a chink, and Addie peeps out directly ! Which means great success or great failure, Harry—and other things on the same scale, I fancy. Thank goodness—oh, yes, saving your presence, really thank goodness—I'm not like that myself!"

" Shall I prove you wrong ? "

" I'm safe. I can't live to see it. And you couldn't prove me wrong without opening all the windows."

" And that I shouldn't do, even to you ? "

" Do you ever do it to yourself ? "

" Perhaps not," he laughed. " But once a storm blew them all in, Lady Evenswood, and left me without any screen, and without defences."

" Have another storm, then," she counselled. She laid a hand on his arm. " Go to Blent."

" As things stand, I can never go to Blent, I can go only to —Blinkhampton."

" What does little Mina Zabriska say to that ? "

" Oh, everything that comes into her head, I suppose, and very volubly."

" I like her," said the old lady with emphasis.

" Is there such a thing as an absolute liking, Lady Evenswood ? What's pleasant at one time is abominable at another. And I've known Madame Zabriska at the other time."

" You were probably at the other time yourself."

" I thought we should agree about the relativity ! "

" There may always be a substratum of friendship," she argued. " You'll say it's sometimes very *sub* ! Ah, well, you're human in the end. You're absolutely forgetting Blent—and you spend your time with an old woman because she can talk to you about it ! Go away and arrange your life, and come back and tell me all about it. And if you're dis-

contented with life, remember that you too will reach the stage of being just told about it some day."

Things will come home to a man at last, strive he never so desperately against them—if the things are true and the man ever honest with himself. It was one night, a little while after this conversation, that the truth came to Harry Tristram and found acceptance or at least surrender. His mind had wandered back to that scene in the Long Gallery, and he had fallen to questioning about his own action. There was a new light on it, and the new light showed him truth. "I must face it; it's not Blent," he said aloud. If it were Blent, it was now Blent only as a scene, a frame, a background. When he pictured Blent, Cecily was there; if he thought of her elsewhere, the picture of Blent vanished. He was in love with her then; and what was the quality that Lady Evenswood had praised in a lover? Let him cultivate it how he would—and the culture would be difficult—yet it would not serve here. If he went to Blent against Cecily's commands and his own promise, he could meet with nothing but a rebuff. Yes, he was in love; and he recognized the *impasse* as fully as Mina herself, although with more self-restraint. But he was glad to know the truth; it strengthened him, and it freed him from a scorn of himself with which he had become afflicted. It was intolerable that a man should be love-sick for a house; it was some solace to find that the house, in order to hold his affections, must hold a woman too.

"Now I know where I am," said Harry. He knew what he had to meet now; he thought he knew how he could treat himself. He went down to Blinkhampton the next morning, harried his builder out of a holiday expedition, and got a useful bit of work in hand. It was, he supposed, inevitable that Cecily should journey with him in the spirit to Blinkhampton; he flattered himself that she got very little chance while he was there. She was the enemy, he declared, with a half-peevish, half-humorous smile. It was not altogether without amusement to invent all manner of devices and all sorts of occupations to evade and elude her. He ventured to declare—following the precedents—that she had treated him shamefully. That broke down. Candour insisted once again on his admitting that he himself would have done exactly the same thing. It

never occurred to him to regret, even for a moment, that he had not taken her at her word, and had not accepted her offer. That would have been to spoil his dream, not to realize it. He asked perfection or nothing, being still unhealed of that presumptuous way of his, which bade the world go hang if it would not give him exactly what he chose. The Tristram motto was still : " No compromise ! "

An unexpected ally came to his assistance. He received a sudden summons from Mr Disney. He found him at work, rather weary and dishevelled. He let Harry in at once, but kept him waiting while he transacted some other business. Here was the place to see him, not in a drawing-room ; his brusque words and quick decisions enabled him to do two men's work. He turned to Harry and said without preface :

" We're going to arbitrate this Barililand question, on behalf of the Company, you know, as well as ourselves. Another instance of my weakness ! Lord Murchison's going over for us. He starts in a fortnight. He asked me to recommend him a secretary. Will you go ? "

Here was help in avoiding Cecily. But what about Blinkhampton ? Harry hesitated a moment.

" I should like it, but I've contracted certain obligations of a business kind at home," he said.

" Well, if you're bound, keep your word and do the work. If you find you're not, I should advise you to take this. It's a good beginning. This is Tuesday. Tell me on Saturday. Good-bye." He rang a hand-bell on the table, and, as his secretary entered, said : " The Canadian papers, please."

" I'm very grateful to you, anyhow."

" That's all right, Tristram. Good-bye."

There was no doubt what would be the practical way of showing gratitude. Harry went out.

He left Mr Disney's presence determined to accept the offer if Iver could spare his services for the time. The determining cause was still Blent, or his cousin at Blent. Blinkhampton was not far enough away ; it rather threw him with people who belonged to the old life than parted him from them. He was weak himself too ; while the people were at hand, he would seek them, as he had sought Lady Evenswood. At the Arbitration he would be far off, beyond the narrow seas and among

folk who, recognizing the peculiarity of his position, would make a point of not mentioning Blent or speaking of anybody connected with it. It was from this point of view that he was inclined toward the offer, and he did not disguise it from himself ; but for it he would rather have gone on with Blinkhampton, perhaps because he had a free hand there, while he could go to the Arbitration only as a subordinate. Blent apart, the offer was valuable to him as a sign of Disney's appreciation rather than on its own account.

He went home and wrote to Iver. The letter weighed all considerations save the one which really weighed with him ; he put himself fairly in Iver's hands but did not conceal his own wish ; he knew that if Iver were against the idea on solid business grounds, he would not be affected by Harry's personal preference. But the business reasons, when examined, did not seem very serious, and Harry thought that he would get leave to go. He rose from his writing with a long sigh. If he received the answer he expected, he was at the parting of the ways ; and he had chosen the path that led directly and finally away from Blent.

An evening paper was brought to him. A tremendous headline caught his notice. " Resignation of Lord Hove ! He will not arbitrate about Barililand. Will the Government break up ? " Probably not, thought Harry ; and it was odd to reflect that, if Lord Hove had got his way, he would have lost his heroic remedy. So great things and small touch and intersect one another. Perhaps Theo (who could now settle that question about the kicking with his friends) would maintain that Flora Disney had talked too much to Harry at dinner, instead of taking all pains to soothe Lord Hove !

It was his last struggle ; he had no doubt that he could win, but the fight was very fierce. Impatient of his quiet rooms, he went out into the crowded streets. At first he found himself envying everybody he passed—the cabman on his box, the rough young fellows escaped from the factory, the man who sold matches and had no cares beyond food and a bed. But presently he forgot them all and walked among shadows. He was at Blent in spirit, sometimes with Addie Tristram, sometimes with Cecily. His imagination undid what his hand had done ; he was smiling again at the efforts of Duplay to frighten

or to displace him. Thus he would be happy for a moment, till reality came back and a dead dulness settled on his soul. Half afraid of himself, he turned round and made for home again ; he could not be sure of his self-control. But again he mastered that, and again paced the streets, now in a grim resolution to tire the mind and body, so that these visions should have nothing to work on and, finding blank unresponsive weariness, should go their ways and leave him in an insensible fatigue. Ever since he disclaimed his inheritance he had been living in a stress of excitement that had given him a fortitude half unnatural ; now this support seemed to fail, and with it went the power to bear.

The remedy worked well ; at eight o'clock he found himself very tired, very hungry, unexpectedly composed. He turned into a little restaurant to dine. The place was crowded, and rather shamefacedly (as is the national way) he sat down at a small table opposite a girl in a light-blue blouse and a very big hat, who was eating risotto and drinking lager beer. She assumed an air of exaggerated primness and gentility, keeping her eyes down toward her plate, and putting very small quantities into her mouth at a time. Glad of distraction, Harry watched her with amusement. At last she glanced up stealthily.

" A fine evening," he said, as he started on his chop.

" Very seasonable," she began in a mincing tone ; but suddenly she broke off to exclaim in a voice and accent more natural and spontaneous, " Good gracious, I've seen you before, haven't I ? "

" I'm not aware that I ever had the honour," said Harry.

" Well, I know your face, anyhow." She was looking at him and searching her memory. " You're not at the halls, are you ? "

" No, I'm not at the halls."

" Well, I do know your face—Why, yes, I've seen your face in the papers. I shall get it in a minute now—don't you tell me." She studied him with determination. Harry ate away in contented amusement. " Yes, you're the man who—why, yes, you're Tristram ? "

" That's right. I'm Tristram."

" Well, to think of that ! Meeting you ! Well, I shall have

something to tell the girls. Why, a friend of mine wrote down to the country, special, for your photo."

"That must have proved a disappointment, I'm afraid. The romance was better than the hero."

"You may say romance!" she conceded heartily. "To be a lord and——!" She leant forward. "I say, how do you get your living now?"

"Gone into the building-trade," he answered.

"You surprise me!" The observation was evidently meant to be extremely civil. "But there, it isn't so much what your job is as having some job. That's what I say."

"I wish I always said—and thought—things as sensible," and he took courage to offer her another glass of lager. She accepted with a slight recrudescence of primness; but her eyes did not leave him now. "I never did!" he heard her murmur as she raised her glass. "Well, here's luck to you, sir! [He had been a lord even if he were now a builder.] You did the straight thing in the end."

"What?" asked Harry, a little startled.

"Well, some did say as you'd known it all along. Oh, I don't say so; some did."

Harry began to laugh. "It doesn't matter, does it, if I did the straight thing in the end?"

"I'm sure as I shouldn't blame you if you had been a bit tempted. I know what that is! Well, sir, I'll say good evening."

"Good evening, miss, and thank you very much," said Harry, rising as she rose. His manner had its old touch of lordliness. His friends criticized that sometimes; this young lady evidently approved.

"You've no cause to thank me," said she, with an admiring look.

"Yes, I have. As it happened, I believe I wanted somebody to remind me that I had done the straight thing in the end, and I'm much obliged to you for doing it."

"Well, I shall have something to tell the girls!" she said again in wondering tones, as she nodded to him and turned slowly away.

Harry was comforted. The stress of his pain was past. He sat on over his simple meal in a leisurely comfortable fashion.

He was happy in the fact that his enemy had at least nothing with which she could reproach him, that he had no reason for not holding his head erect before her. And the girl's philosophy had been good. He had a job, and that was the great thing in this world. He felt confident that the struggle was won now, and that it would never have to be fought again in so severe a fashion. His self-respect was intact ; if he had been beaten, he would never have forgiven himself.

He regained his rooms. A letter lay waiting for him on the table. He opened it and found that it was from Mina Zabriska.

" We are back here," she wrote. " I am staying at Blent till my uncle comes down. I must write and say good-bye to you. I dare say we shall never meet again, or merely by chance. I am very unhappy about it all, but with two people like Cecily and you nothing else could have happened. I see that now, and I'm not going to try to interfere any more. I shan't ask you to forgive me for interfering, because you've made the result quite enough punishment for anything I did wrong. And now Cecily goes about looking just like you—hard and proud and grim ; and she's begun to move things about and alter arrangements at Blent. That's what brings it home to me most of all." (" And to me," interposed Harry as he read.) " If I was the sort of woman you think me, I should go on writing to you. But I shan't write again. I am going to stay at Merrion through the winter, and since you won't come here, this is the last of me for a long time anyhow. Oh, you Tristrams ! Good-bye, MINA ZABRISKA."

" Poor little Imp ! " said Harry. " She's a very good sort ; and she seems about right. It's the end of everything." He paused and looked round. " Except of these rooms—and my work—and, well, life at large, you know ! " He laughed in the sudden realization of how much was left after there was an end of all—life to be lived, work to be done, enjoyments to be won. He could know this, although he could hardly yet feel it in any very genuine fashion. He could project his mind forward to a future appreciation of what he could not at the moment relish ; and he saw that life would be full and rich with him, even although there were an end of all. " But I don't believe," he said to himself, slowly smiling, " that I should ever have come to understand that or to—to fulfil it unless I had—what did

the girl say?—done the straight thing in the end, and come out of Blent. Well, old Blent, good-bye!" He crumpled up Mina's letter, and flung it into the grate.

The maid-servant opened the door. "Two gentlemen to see you, sir," she said.

"Oh, say I'm busy——" he began.

"We must see you, please," insisted Mr Jenkinson Neeld, with unusual firmness. He turned to the man with him, saying: "Here is Mr Tristram, Colonel Edge."

CHAPTER XXV

There's the Lady too!

THERE was nothing very remarkable about Colonel Wilmot Edge. He was a slightly built, trim man, but his trimness was not distinctively military. He might have been anything, save that just now the tan on his face witnessed to an out-of-door life. His manner was cold, his method of speech leisurely and methodical. At first sight Harry saw nothing in him to modify the belief in which he had grown up—that the Edges were an unattractive race, unable to appreciate Tristrams, much less worthy to mate with them. He gave the Colonel a chair rather grudgingly, and turned to old Mr Neeld for an explanation of the visit.

Neeld had fussed himself into a seat already, and had drawn some sheets of paper covered with typewriting from his pocket. He spread them out, smoothed them down, cleared his throat, and answered Harry's look by a glance at Edge. Mr Neeld was in a fidget, a fidget of importance and expectancy.

"You will know," said Edge gravely, "that no ordinary matter has led me to call on you, Mr Tristram. However little we may be responsible for the past, we have to recognize it. I should not, under ordinary circumstances, have sought your acquaintance. You must consider this interview purely as one of a business kind. I have just returned to England. For two months I have been out of the way of receiving letters or newspapers. I went to the Imperium Club to-night—I arrived only this morning—and dined in Neeld's company. As it chanced, we spoke of you, and I learnt what has happened since I left England. I have lost no time in calling on you."

Neeld was listening and fidgeting with his sheets of paper. The Colonel's preamble excited little interest in Harry. The reaction of his struggle was on him; he was courteously but not keenly attentive.

"It is not agreeable to me to speak of my brother to you, Mr Tristram. Doubtless we should differ if we discussed his character and conduct. It is not necessary."

" Is Sir Randolph Edge concerned in what you have to say to me ? " asked Harry.

" Yes, I am sorry to say he is. Another person is concerned also."

" One moment. You are, of course, aware that I no longer represent my family ? Legally I'm not even a member of it. It is possible that you ought to address yourself to Lady Tristram—my cousin—or to her lawyers."

" I have to speak to you. Is the name of the Comtesse d'Albreville known to you, Mr Tristram ? "

" Yes, I've heard my mother speak of meeting her in Paris."

" That would be when Lady Tristram was residing with my brother ? "

" My mother was never in Paris after that, I believe. It would be at that time, Colonel Edge."

" You are aware that later—after he parted from Lady Tristram—my brother went to Russia, where he had business interests ? "

" I have very good reason to know that." Harry smiled at Mr Neeld, who had apparently got all he could out of his papers, and was sitting quiet and upright in an eager attention.

" What I am about to say is known, I believe, to myself alone—and to Neeld here, to whom I told it to-night. While my brother was in Russia, he was joined by the Comtesse. She paid him a visit—secretly, I need hardly add. She passed under the name of Madame Valfier, and she resided in the house adjoining Randolph's. Lady Tristram was not, of course, aware of the relations between her and my brother. I will come now to the time of my brother's death. When he fell ill, he had just completed the sale of one of his Russian properties. Lady Tristram did not, I dare say, speak of the Comtesse's character to you ? "

" I never remember hearing my mother speak of anybody's character," said Harry with a smile.

" She was a brilliant woman—she died, by the way, two or three years ago—but extravagant and fond of money. She prevailed on my brother to promise her the price of this property as a gift. The sum was considerable—about seven thousand pounds."

Harry nodded. Here seemed to be some possible light on the reasons for the interview.

"This money was to be paid—in gold—on a certain day. I speak now from information imparted to me subsequently by the Comtesse herself. It was given under a promise of secrecy which I have kept hitherto, but now find myself compelled in honesty to break."

"There can be no question of what is your duty, Edge," Mr Neeld put in.

"I think none. My brother during his illness discussed the matter with the Comtesse. The money was payable in Petersburg. He could not hope to be well enough to go there. At her suggestion he signed a paper authorizing payment to be made to her or to an agent appointed by her. The money being destined for her ultimately, this naturally seemed the best arrangement. She could go and receive the money, or send for it—as a fact she went in person when the time came—and all would be settled."

"Quite so. And the transaction would not appear on the face of Sir Randolph's accounts or bank-book," Harry suggested.

"It's possible that weight was given to that consideration too, but it is not very material. The Comtesse, then, was in possession of this authority. My brother's illness took a turn for the worse. To be brief, he died before the day came on which the money was to be paid."

"And she presented the authority all the same?" asked Harry. "And got the money, did she?"

"That is precisely the course she adopted," assented Colonel Edge.

Harry took a walk up and down the room and returned to the hearthrug.

"I'm very sensible of your kindness in coming here to-day," he said, "and your conduct is that of a man of honour. But at this point I'll stop you, please. I'm aware that *prima facie* the law would pronounce me to be Sir Randolph's son. That has always been disclaimed on our side and could easily be disproved on yours. I have nothing to do with Sir Randolph Edge or his property."

The Colonel listened unmoved.

" In any case you would have nothing to do with my brother's property," he remarked. " He left a will, by which I was constituted sole legatee."

" Then if she robbed anybody she robbed you ? "

" Certainly ; and three years later she came and told me so."

" Then how in the world does it concern me ? " cried Harry impatiently.

" You put your finger on the spot, Mr Tristram, but you took it off again. You said she presented the authority all the same."

" Yes. The authority would be revoked by his death. At least I suppose there's no question of that ? Did she get at them before they heard of the death ? "

" This money was payable on the 22nd June—the 10th as it's reckoned in Russia—but we needn't trouble about that. As you and Neeld are both aware, on the 18th my brother fell into a collapse which was mistaken for death."

" Yes, the 18th," murmured Neeld, referring to the paper before him, and reading Josiah Cholderton's account of what Madame de Kries had told him at Heidelberg.

" From that attack he rallied temporarily, but not until his death had been reported."

" I am not the man to forget that circumstance," said Harry.

" The report of his death was, of course, contradicted immediately. The doctor attending him saw to that."

" Naturally ; and I suppose the Comtesse would see to it too."

" And the only importance that the occurrence of the 18th has for us at present is that, according to the Comtesse's story, it suggested to the doctor the course which she, on his prompting as she declared and certainly with his connivance, afterward adopted. My brother, having rallied from his first collapse, kept up the fight a little while longer. It was, however, plain to the doctor that he could live but a very short time. The Comtesse knew this. My brother was not in a condition to transact business and was incapable of securing to her any benefit by testamentary disposition even if he had wished to do so. Her only chance was the money for the property. This she saw her way to securing with the doctor's

help, even although my brother should die before it fell due and the authority she held should thereby lose its legal validity."

"You mean that they determined to carry out a fraud if necessary?"

"Precisely. I must remind you that my brother knew nothing of this. He was altogether past understanding anything about it. I may be very brief now, but I am still anxious that you should fully understand. All that I'm saying to you is beyond question and can be proved at any time by taking evidence on the spot; it is easily available."

Harry had sat down by now and was listening intently.

"On the morning of the 22nd," Edge pursued in his level methodical way, "the Comtesse went to the station escorted by Dr Migratz; that was his name—rather that is his name; he is still alive. On the way they met the British Vice-Consul, and in reply to inquiries from him said that my brother had had another attack but had rallied again. Dr Migratz expressed the opinion that he would live another two days, while Madame Valfier (the Vice-Consul knew her by that name) was sanguine enough to talk of the possibility of a recovery. She impressed him very much by her courage and hopefulness; she was, I may remark, a handsome and attractive woman. Leaving the Vice-Consul, they reached the station and there parted. Migratz returned immediately to my brother's house and remained there, the case being declared to be so critical as to require unremitting attention. Madame Valfier—the Comtesse—took the train to Petersburg, reached it that evening, presented the authority early next morning, and was back about midnight—that being the 23rd. The next day my brother's death was announced, certified by Migratz, and duly registered as the law of the place required." He drew a paper from his pocket. "This is a copy of the entry, showing death on the 24th."

"That document is very familiar to me, Colonel Edge. It gives both Styles, doesn't it?"

"Yes, both Styles, but—Well, you see for yourself. My story is done. With Migratz's connivance—a woman who acted as nurse was squared too, and her evidence is available—the actual date of death was concealed, and the Comtesse

d'Albreville had time to present her authority and receive the money. After paying her accomplices their price, she left Russia with the bulk of it immediately."

Harry glanced at Neeld; the old man's face was full of excitement and his hand trembled as it lay on the leaves of Josiah Cholderton's Journal.

"My mother was married to my father on the 23rd," said Harry slowly.

"My brother died on the 22nd," said Wilmot Edge. "He was dead before the Comtesse started for Petersburg."

Harry made no comment. He sat still and thoughtful.

"Of course, I was put on the track of the affair," Edge pursued, "by the disappearance of the money. I had little difficulty in guessing that there had been something queer, but what it was did not cross my mind for a long while. Even after I had a clue, I found Migratz a tough customer, and for a long time I totally failed to identify Madame Valfier. When, thanks to a series of chances, I did so, it was a shock to me. She was the wife of a man of high position and high reputation. She had contrived—she was a remarkable woman—to carry out this expedition of hers without rousing any suspicion; she had returned to her husband and children. Finding herself in danger, she took the bold course of throwing herself on my mercy, and sent for me to Paris. It was not my desire to rake up the story, to injure my brother's memory, or to break up the woman's home. I pocketed the loss as far as I was concerned. As for you, I didn't know you were concerned. I had never gone into the details; I accepted the view which your own conduct, and Lady Tristram's, suggested. I promised silence, guarding myself by a proviso that I must speak if the interests of third persons were ever affected. Your interests are affected now, and I have spoken, Mr Tristram—or Lord Tristram, as I undoubtedly ought to say."

Harry turned to Mr Neeld with a smile and pointed at the leaves of the Journal.

"There was something Cholderton didn't know after all," he said. "A third date—neither the 18th not the 24th! Twenty-four hours! Well, I suppose it's enough!"

"It's enough to make all the difference to you," said Neeld. "It makes the action you took in giving up your position

unnecessary and wrong. It restores the state of things which existed——"

"Before you and Mina Zabriska came to Blent—and brought Mr Cholderton?" He sat smiling a moment. "Forgive me; I'm very inhospitable," he said, and offered them cigarettes and whiskey.

Neeld refused; the Colonel took both.

"You may imagine with what feelings I heard your story," Edge resumed, "and found that the Comtesse's fraud was really the entire basis of your action. If I had been in England the thing need never have happened."

"It has happened," said Harry, "and—and I don't quite know where we are." For the world was all altered again, just when the struggle of the evening had seemed to settle it. The memory of the girl in the restaurant flashed across his mind. What would she—what would she say to this?

Colonel Edge was evidently rather a talkative man. He began again, rather as though he were delivering a little set speech.

"It's perhaps hardly to be expected," he said, "that any degree of intimacy should exist between your family and mine, Lord Tristram, but I venture to hope that the part which it has been my privilege to play to-day may do something to obliterate the memories of the past. We don't perhaps know all the rights of it. I am loyal to my brother, but I knew the late Lady Tristram, and I can appreciate all that her friends valued and prized in her."

"Very good, Edge, very good," murmured emotional old Mr Neeld. "Very proper, most proper."

"And I hope that old quarrels need not be eternal?"

"I'm very much in your debt, and I'm sincerely grateful, Colonel Edge. As for the past—There are graves; let it lie in them."

"Thank you, Lord Tristram, thank you," and the Colonel gave Harry his hand.

"Excellent, excellent!" muttered Mr Neeld as he folded up the leaves of Josiah Cholderton's diary.

"You can call on me for proofs whenever you wish to proceed. After what has occurred, I presume they will be necessary."

"Yes, yes—for his seat," assented Neeld.

"And to satisfy public opinion," added Edge.

There was a pause. Neeld broke it by saying timidly:

"And—er—there is, of course, the—the lady. The lady who now holds the title and estates."

"Of course!" agreed Edge, with a nod that apologized for forgetfulness.

Of course there was! Harry smiled. He had been wondering how long they would take to think of the lady who now held the title and estates. Well, they had come to her at last—after providing for the requirements of the House of Lords and the demands of public opinion—after satisfying the girl in the restaurant, in fact. Yes, of course, there was the lady too.

Though he smiled, he was vexed and suffered a vague disappointment. It is to be wished that things would happen in a manner harmonious with their true nature—the tragic tragically, the comic so that laughter roars out, the melodramatic with the proper limelight effects. To do the Tristrams justice, this was generally achieved where they were concerned; Harry could have relied on his mother and on Cecily; he could rely on himself if he were given a suitable environment, one that appealed to him and afforded responsive feelings. The family was not in the habit of wasting its opportunities for emotion. But who could be emotional now—in face of these two elderly gentlemen? Neeld's example made such a thing ridiculous; Colonel Edge would obviously consider it unsoldier-like. The chance had been frittered away; life was at its old game of neglecting its own possibilities. There was nothing but to acquiesce; a fine melodrama had been degraded into a business interview with two elderly and conscientious gentlemen. The scene in the Long Gallery had at least been different from this! Harry bowed his head; he must be thankful for small blessings; it was something that they had remembered the lady at last.

At a glance from Edge, Neeld rose to go.

"Pray wait—wait a minute or two," begged Harry. "I want to think for a minute."

Neeld sat down again. It is very likely they were as surprised at him as he was childishly vexed with them. For he exhibited perfect calm. Yet perhaps Colonel Edge, who had

given so colourless an account of the Comtesse's wild appeal to him, was well suited.

"I'm going down to Iver's to-morrow," said Old Neeld, tucking the extract from the Journal into his pocket.

"To Iver's?" After a moment's silence Harry fairly laughed. Edge was surprised, not understanding what a difference the Comtesse's manœuvre had made there too. He could not be expected to know all the difference it had made to Harry's life, even to the man himself. Two irresponsible ladies—say Addie and—well, Madame Valfier—may indeed make differences.

"Yes, to Fairholme," continued old Neeld. "We—we may see you there now?"

Edge looked up with an interested glance. It had occurred to him that he was turning somebody out as well as putting somebody in.

"You'll have, of course, to communicate what I have said to—to——?"

"Oh, we'll say Lady Tristram still," Harry interrupted.

Edge gave a little bow. "I shall be ready to meet her or her advisers at any time," he remarked. "She will, I hope, recognize that no other course was open to me. She must not think that there is any room for doubt."

Harry's brain was at work now; he saw himself going to Blent, going to tell Cecily.

"Possibly," Mr Neeld suggested, "it would be better to entrust a third person with the task of giving her this news? One of her own sex perhaps?" He seemed to contemplate a possible fainting-fit, and, remembering his novels, the necessity of cutting stay-laces, a task better left to women.

"You're thinking of Mina? Of Mina Zabriska?" asked Harry, laughing. There again, what a loss! Why had not Mina heard it at first hand? She would have known how to treat the thing.

"She's always taken a great interest in the matter, and—and I understand is very friendly with—with Miss Gainsborough," said Neeld.

"We shall have to make up our minds what to call ourselves soon," sighed Harry.

"There can be no doubt at all," Edge put in; "and if I

may venture to suggest, I should say that the sooner the necessity is faced the better."

"Certainly, certainly," Harry assented absently. Even the girl in the restaurant must know about it soon; there must be another pow-wowing in all the papers soon. But what would Cecily say? "If ever the time comes——" He had laughed at that; it had sounded so unlikely, so unreal, so theatrical. "If ever the time comes, I shall remember." That was a strange thing to look back to now. But it was all strange—the affair of the beastly new viscounty, Blinkhampton and its buildings, the Arbitration and the confidence of Mr Disney. Madame Valfier—Comtesse d'Albreville—with a little help from Addie Tristram had brought all these things about. The result of Harry's review of them was English enough to satisfy Wilmot Edge himself.

"The whole thing makes me look rather an ass, I think," said he.

"No doubt you acted impulsively," Edge allowed. It was fully equivalent to an assent.

"Good heavens, I'd been brought up to it! It had always been the fact of my life." He made no pretences about the matter now. "It never occurred to me to think of any mistake. That certificate"—it lay on the table still—"was the sword of Damocles." He laughed as he spoke the hackneyed old phrase. "And Damocles knew the sword was there, or there'd have been no point in it."

The two had rather lost track of his mood. They looked at one another again.

"You've a lot to think of. We'll leave you," said the Colonel.

"But—but what am I to do?" Old Neeld's voice was almost a bleat in his despair. "Am I to tell people at Blentmouth?"

"The communication should come from an authoritative quarter," Edge advised.

"It's bound to be a blow to her," said Neeld. "Suddenly lifted up, suddenly thrown down! Poor girl!"

"Justice is the first thing," declared Wilmot Edge. Now he might have been on a court martial.

They knew nothing whatever of the truth or the true position.

" We may rely on—on Lord Tristram—to treat the matter with every delicacy, Edge."

" I'm sure of it, Neeld, I'm sure of it."

" He has been through what is practically the same experience himself."

" A very remarkable case, very remarkable. The state of the law which makes such a thing possible——"

" Ah, there I don't agree, Edge. There may be hardships on individuals, but in the interests of morality——"

" You must occasionally put up with damned absurdity," Harry interrupted rather roughly. " I beg your pardon, Mr Neeld. I—I'm a bit worried over this."

They sat silent then, watching him for a few moments. He stood leaning his arm on the mantelpiece, his brows knit but a smile lingering on his lips. He was seeing the scene again, the scene in which he was to tell Cecily. He knew what the end of it would be. They were strangers now. The scene would leave them strangers still. Still Mina Zabriska would be left to cry : " You Tristrams ! " Given that they were Tristrams, no other result was possible. They had been through what Mr Neeld called practically the same experience already ; in that very room it had happened.

Suddenly the two men saw a light born in Harry's eyes ; his brow grew smooth, the smile on his lips wider. He gave a moment's more consideration to the new thing. Then he raised his head and spoke to Wilmot Edge.

" There are a good many complications in this matter, Colonel Edge. I've had my life upset once before, and I assure you it's rather troublesome work. It wants a little time and a little thinking. You get rather confused—always changing your train, you know. I have work on hand—plans and so forth. And, as you say, of course there's the lady too." He laughed as he ended by borrowing Neeld's phrase.

" I can understand all that, Lord Tristram."

" Do you mind saying Mr Tristram ? Saying Mr Tristram to me and to everybody for the present ? It won't be for long ; a week perhaps."

" You mean, keep the change in the position a secret ? " Edge seemed rather startled.

" You've kept the secret for many years, Colonel. Shall

we say a week more? And you, too, Mr Neeld? Nothing at all to the people at Blentmouth? Shall we keep Miss S. in the dark for a week more?" The thought of Miss Swinkerton carried obvious amusement with it.

"You mean to choose your opportunity with—with your cousin?" Neeld asked.

"Yes, exactly—to choose my opportunity. You see the difficult character of the situation? I ask your absolute silence for a week."

"Really I——" Old Neeld hesitated a little. "These concealments lead to such complications," he complained. He was thinking, no doubt, of the Iver engagement and the predicament in which it had landed him.

"I don't ask it on my own account. There's my cousin."

"Yes, yes, Neeld, there's the lady, too."

"Well, Edge, if you're satisfied, I can't stand out. For a week then—silence."

"Absolute!" said Harry. "Without a look or a word?"

"You have my promise," said Wilmot Edge.

"And mine. But—but I shall feel very awkward," sighed poor Mr Neeld. He might have added that he did feel a sudden and poignant pang of disappointment. Lived there the man who would not have liked to carry that bit of news in his portmanteau when he went out of town? At least that man was not Mr Jenkinson Neeld.

"I'll choose my time, and I won't keep you long," said Harry.

With that they left him. But they had a word together before Edge caught his 'bus in Piccadilly.

"Cool young chap!" said he. "Took it quietly enough."

"Yes, considering the enormous difference it makes," agreed Neeld. His use of that particular phrase was perhaps an unconscious reminiscence of the words in the Journal, the words that Addie used when she burst into Madame de Kries' room at Heidelberg.

Edge chuckled a little. "Not much put out about the girl either, eh?"

"Now you say so——" Neeld shook his head. "I hope he'll do it tactfully," he sighed.

Edge did not seem to consider that likely. He in his turn shook his head.

" I said no more than I thought about Addie Tristram," he remarked. " But the fact is, they're a rum lot, and there's no getting over it, Neeld."

" They—er—have their peculiarities, no doubt," admitted Mr Neeld.

CHAPTER XXVI

A Business Call

"MY dear, isn't there something odd about Mr Neeld?" Mrs Iver put the question, her anxious charity struggling with a natural inquisitiveness.

"About Neeld? I don't know. Is there?" He did not so much as look up from his paper. "He's coming with us to Blent to-night, I suppose?"

"Yes. And he seems quite excited about that. And he was positively rude to Miss Swinkerton at lunch when she told him that Lady Tristram meant to give a ball next winter. I expect his nerves are out of order."

Small wonder if they were, surely! Let us suppose Guy Fawkes' scheme not prematurely discovered, and one Member of a full House privy to it and awaiting the result. That Member's position would be very like Mr Neeld's. Would he listen to the debate with attention? Could he answer questions with sedulous courtesy?

From the moment of his arrival Mr Neeld had been plunged into the Tristram affair, and surrounded by people who were connected with it. But it must be admitted that he had it on his brain and saw it everywhere. For to-day it was not the leading topic of the neighbourhood, and Miss S.'s observation had been only by the way. The engagement was the topic, and only Neeld (or perhaps Mina Zabriska too, at Blent) insisted on digging up a hypothetical past and repeating, in retrospective rumination, that Harry Tristram might have been the lucky man. As for such an idea—well, Miss S. happened to know that there had never been anything in it; Janie Iver herself had told her so, she said. The question between Janie and Miss S., which this assertion raises, may be passed by without discussion.

He had met Gainsborough essaying a furtive entry into Blentmouth and heading toward the curiosity-shop—with a good excuse this time. It was Cecily's birthday, and the occasion, which was to be celebrated by a dinner-party, must

be marked by a present also. Neeld went with the little gentleman, and they bought a bit of old Chelsea (which looked very young for its age). Coming out, Gainsborough sighted Mrs Trumbler coming up High Street and Miss S. coming down it. He doubled up a side street to the churchyard, Neeld pursuing him at a more leisurely pace.

"It's positively worthy of a place at Blent—in the Long Gallery," panted Gainsborough, hugging his brown-paper-covered prize. "You'll be interested to see the changes we're making, Mr Neeld. Cecily has begun to take an enormous interest in the house, and I—I'm settling down."

"You don't regret London ever?"

"I shall run up now and then. My duty is to my daughter. Of course her life is changed." He sighed as he added: "We're getting quite used to that."

"She has come to love the place, I dare say?"

"Yes, yes. She's in very good spirits and quite happy in her position now, I think." He glanced over his shoulder. Miss S. was in sight. "Good-bye. So glad we shall see you to-night." He made his escape at a run. Neeld, having been interrogated at lunch already, was allowed to pass by with a lift of his hat.

Janie was very happy. She at least thought no more of that bygone episode. She asked no questions about Harry Tristram. He had dropped out of her life. He seemed to have dropped out of the life of the countryside too. That was strange anyhow, when it was remembered how large a local figure the young man had cut when Neeld came first to Fairholme; it was stranger still in view of what must soon be. The announcement of the engagement seemed to assume to write *finis* to Harry as a factor in Blentmouth society. In that point of view the moment chosen for it was full of an unconscious irony. Janie would not have gone back to him now, and Neeld did not suspect her of any feeling which could have made that possible. It was merely odd that she should be putting an appropriate finish to a thing which in the meantime had been suddenly, absolutely, and radically undone. Neeld was loyal to his word; but none may know the terrible temptation he suffered; a nod, a wink, a hint, an ambiguity—anything would have given him some relief.

Harry was mentioned only once—in connexion with his letter to Iver about the Arbitration. Iver was not inclined to let him go.

" He has great business ability. It's a pity to waste his time. He can make money, Neeld."

" Disney's a good friend to have," Neeld suggested.

" If he stays in, yes. But this thing won't be popular."

Neeld could maintain no interest in the conversation. It had to proceed all along on a baseless presumption, to deal with a state of things which did not exist. What might be wise for Harry—Harry Nothing-at-all—might be unwise for Tristram of Blent, and conversely.

" I must leave it to him," Iver concluded. " But I shall tell him that I hope he won't go. He's got his way in the world to make first. He can try politics later on, if he likes."

" No doubt you're right," murmured old Neeld, both uneasy and uninterested. He was feeling something of what he had experienced once before ; he knew the truth and he had to keep his friend in the dark. In those earlier days he had one confidant, one accomplice, in Mina Zabriska. The heavy secret was all his own to carry now.

As a consequence of his preoccupation Janie Iver found him rather unsympathetic, and with her usual candour she told him so.

" You don't really appreciate Bob," said she. " Nobody quite knows him except me. I didn't use to, but now I know what a strong character he has."

Unwontedly cynical thoughts rose in old Mr Neeld. Had he come down to Fairholme to listen to the platitudes of virtuous love ? Indeed he had come for no such thing. All young men have strong characters while they are engaged.

" And it's such a comfort to have a man one can lean upon," Janie pursued, looking, however, admirably capable of standing without extraneous support.

There it was again ! She'd be calling him her ' master ' next—as the heroine does in the Third Act, to unfailing applause. What was all this to the ears that listened for a whisper of Harry Tristram ?

" The most delightful thing is," Janie pursued, " that our marriage is to make no change at all in his way of life. We're

going to live at Mingham just as he has lived all his life—a real country life on a farm ! " There was no hint that other ideals of existence had ever possessed an alluring charm ; the high life with Harry, the broad and cosmopolitan life with the Major—where were they ? " I've insisted on it, the one thing I've had my own way in."

Bob was being transmogrified into a Man of Iron, if not of Blood. Vainly Mr Neeld consulted his memories.

" And Mingham's so bound up with it all. I used to go there with Mina Zabriska." She smiled in retrospect ; it would have been pardonable if Neeld had smiled too. " I haven't seen her for ever so long," Janie added, " but she'll be at Blent to-night."

Ah, if he might give just the barest hint to Mina now !

" Bob isn't particularly fond of her, you see, so we don't meet much now. He thinks she's rather spiteful."

" Not at all," said Neeld, almost sharply. " She's a very intelligent woman."

" Oh, yes, intelligent ! " She said no more. If people did not agree with Bob—well, there it was.

Bob bore his idealization very well. It was easy to foresee a happy and a remarkably equable married life. But the whole thing had no flavour for Mr Neeld's palate, spoilt by the spices of Tristram vagaries. A decent show of friendliness was all he could muster. It was all that Iver himself seemed to expect ; he was resigned but by no means exultant.

" The girl's very happy, and that's the thing. For myself—well, I've got most of the things I started to get, and if this isn't quite what I looked forward to—Well, you remember how things fell out ? "

Neeld nodded. He remembered that very well.

" And, as I say, it's all very satisfactory." He shrugged his shoulders and relighted his cigar. He was decidedly a reasonable man, thought Neeld.

The evening came—Neeld had been impatient for it—and they drove over to Blent, where Bob was to meet them.

" It's a fine place for a girl to have," said Iver, stirred to a sudden sense of the beauty of the old house as it came into view.

They were all silent for a moment. Such a place to have,

such a place to lose! Neeld heard Mrs Iver sighing in her good-natured motherly fashion. But still Harry was not mentioned.

"And if they had a business man—with his head on his shoulders—to manage the estate, it'd be worth half as much again." This time it was Iver who sighed; the idea of anything not having all the money made out of it that could be made offended his instincts.

"She'll have a husband, dear," his wife reminded him.

"I wonder if Bob'll get there before we do," said Janie, with the air of starting a subject of real interest in lieu of continuing idle talk.

The evening was hot and the hall-door of Blent stood open. Cecily was sitting in the hall, and came out to greet them. She seemed to Neeld to complete the picture as she stood there in her young fairness, graciously welcoming her guests. She was pale, but wore a gay air and did the honours with natural dignity. No sign of strangeness to the place, and no embarrassment, were visible.

"Oh, my dear, how you remind me of Lady Tristram!" good Mrs Iver broke out.

Neeld pressed the girl's hand with a grip that she noticed; she looked at him in a sort of question and for a moment flushed a little.

"It's very kind of you to come," she said to him softly.

"How are you, Mr Neeld?" The Imp had suddenly darted out from somewhere and was offering her hand. "I'm staying here, you know." And in a whisper she added: "That young man of Janie's has been here a quarter of an hour, and Cecily wasn't dressed, and I've had to talk to him. Oh, dear!" She had her hand on his arm and drew him apart. "Any news of Harry Tristram?" she whispered.

"Er—no—none."

Her quick eyes looked at him in suspicion; he had hesitated a little.

"You've seen him?" she asked.

"Just casually, Madame Zabriska."

She turned away with a peevish little pout. "Then you're not very interesting," she seemed to say. But Neeld forgave

her : she had asked him about Harry. He could forgive more easily because he had deluded her.

Addie Tristram's picture was at one end of the dining-room now, and Cecily's place was under it.

" My first dinner-party ! Although it's a small one," she said to Iver as she sat down.

" Your first at Blent ? "

" The first anywhere—actually ! " she laughed, and then grew thoughtful for a moment, glancing out into the dark and listening to the flap of a bat's wings against the window.

" You'll have plenty now," said he, as he watched her admiringly. He forgot, man that he was, that girls do not find permanent happiness in dinner-parties.

It was evident that Neeld ought never to have come to Blent that evening. For the talk was of futures, and, out of deference to the young hostess, even more of hers than of the engaged couple's. Their's indeed was not provocative of discussion ; if satisfactory, it was also obvious. Cecily's opened more topics, and she herself was willing and seemed even eager to discuss it. She fell in with Mrs Iver's suggestion that she ought to be a centre of good works in the district, and in pursuance of this idea should accept the position of Patron to Miss Swinkerton's complicated scheme of benevolence. She agreed with Iver that the affairs of the estate probably wanted overhauling, and that a capable man should be engaged for the task, even at some expense. She professed herself ready to co-operate with Bob in protecting the fishing of the Blent. She was, in a word, very much the proprietor. It was difficult for Neeld to sit and hear all this. And opposite to him sat Mina Zabriska, rather silent and demure, but losing no chance of reminding him by a stealthy glance that this ordinary talk covered a remarkable situation—as indeed it did, but not of the precise nature that Mina supposed. Neeld felt as though he were behind the scenes of fate's theatre, and he did not find the place comfortable. He saw the next tableau in preparation and had to ask himself what its effect would be on an unsuspecting audience. He came to the conclusion that foreknowledge was an attribute not likely to make human beings happy ; it could not easily make terms with sympathy.

When dessert was on the table, Iver, true to his habits and

traditions, felt that it was the occasion for a few friendly informal words ; the birthday and the majority of young Lady Tristram demanded so much recognition. Admirably concise and simple in ordinary conversation, he became, like so many of his countrymen, rather heavy and pompous when he got on his legs. Yet he made what everybody except Mina Zabriska considered a very appropriate little speech. Gainsborough grew quite enthusiastic over it ; and Neeld thought it was wonderfully good (if it had not happened, of course, to be by force of circumstances an absurdity from beginning to end). Cecily was content to say : " Thank you," but her father could not refuse himself the privilege of reply ; the reply was on her behalf, but it was mainly about himself—also a not uncommon characteristic of after-dinner oratory. However he agreed with Iver that everything was for the best, and that they were entitled to congratulate their hostess and themselves on things at large. Then Neeld had a turn over the engagement (a subject dull but safe !) and the proceedings were stopped only by Bob Broadley's headlong flight when the question of his response arose.

" Thank goodness, that's over ! " said Mina snappishly, as she stepped out into the garden, followed by Mr Neeld. The rest went off to see the treasures of the Long Gallery. Mina turned to him with a quick question : " You saw Mr Tristram, how is he ? "

" Harry Tristram is quite well and in very good spirits. I never saw a man better in my life."

Mina was silent for a moment. Then she broke out : " I call it disgusting. He's in good spirits, and she's in good spirits, and—and there's an end of it, I suppose ! The next thing will be——"

" It's not the end if there's a next thing," Neeld suggested timidly.

" Oh, don't be tiresome. The next thing'll be some stupid girl for him and some idiot of a man for her. How I wish I'd never come to Merrion ! "

" Don't despair ; things may turn out better than you think."

" They can't," she declared fretfully. " I shall go away."

"What a pity! Miss Gainsborough—Lady Tristram, I mean—will miss you so much."

"Let her!" said the Imp ungraciously. "I've put myself out enough about the Tristrams."

Neeld forbore to remind her of the entirely voluntary nature of her sacrifices; after all he was not the man to throw stones on that account.

"Wait a few days anyhow," he urged her. In a few days something must happen.

"A few days? Oh, yes!" As a matter of fact she meant to stay all the winter. "She's started," she went on, with an irritated jerk of her head toward the Long Gallery, "putting all the things in different places and rearranging everything."

"I should imagine that Mr Gainsborough's enjoying himself then?"

"She doesn't let him touch a thing," replied Mina with a fleeting smile. "He just stands about with a duster. That contents him well enough, though. Oh, yes, I shall go. The Broadleys won't care about me, and Cecily won't want me long."

Neeld could give real comfort only at the price of indiscretion. Moreover he was not at all sure that a disclosure of the truth would bring any comfort, for Mina wanted to be on both sides and to harmonize devotion to Cecily with zeal for Harry. Neeld did not quite see how this was to be done, since it was understood that as Harry would take nothing from Cecily, so Cecily would refuse anything from Harry.

"We must wait and see how it all turns out," said he.

"I hate people who say that," grumbled Mina disconsolately. "And I do think that the Ivers have grown extraordinarily stupid—caught it from Bob Broadley, I suppose."

When injustice springs not from judgment but from temper, it is not worth arguing against. Neeld held his tongue and they sat silent on the seat by the river, looking across to Merrion and hearing the voices of their friends through the open windows of the Long Gallery.

Presently there came to them through the stillness of the night the sound of wheels, not on the Blentmouth side, but up the valley, on the Mingham and Fillingford road. The sound

ceased without the appearance of any vehicle, but it had reminded Neeld of the progress of time.

" It must be getting late," he said, rising. " I'll go and see if they think of starting home. Did you hear wheels on the road—toward the Pool ? "

" Bob Broadley's cart coming for him, I suppose."

" No, I don't think so. He's going back to Fairholme with us. I heard him say so."

Mina was languidly indifferent, and Mr Neeld trotted off into the house. Mina sat on, frowning at the idea that in a few minutes she would have to go in and say good-bye ; for the voices came no more from the Long Gallery and she heard the guests laughing and chattering in the hall, as they prepared for departure. Suddenly she discerned the figure of a man coming into sight across the river. He walked slowly, as it seemed stealthily, till he came to the end of the footbridge. Then he halted and looked up at the house. It was gaily lighted. After waiting a moment the man turned back and disappeared up the road in the direction of Mingham. Mina rose and strolled to the bridge. She crossed it and looked up the road. She could make out dimly the stranger's retreating form.

She heard Cecily calling to her, and ran back to the house. A wonderful idea had come into her head, born of a vaguely familiar aspect that the bearing of the man had for her. But she laughed at it, telling herself that it was all nonsense ; and as she joined in the talk and farewells it grew faint and was almost forgotten. Yet she whispered to old Neeld with a laugh :

" I saw a man on the road just now who looked rather like Harry. I couldn't see him properly, you know."

Neeld started and looked at her with obvious excitement. She repaid his stare with one of equal intensity.

" Why, you don't think——? " she began in amazement.

" Come, Neeld, we're waiting for you," cried Iver from the wagonette, while Bob in irrepressible spirits burst into song as he gathered up the reins. He had deposed the coachman and had Janie with him on the box.

They drove off, waving their hands and shouting good night. Mina ran a little way after them and saw Neeld turning his head this way and that, as though he thought there might be

something to see. When she returned she found Gainsborough saying good night to his daughter; at the same moment the lights in the Long Gallery were put out. Cecily slipped her arm through hers and they walked out again into the garden. After three or four minutes the wagonette, having made the circuit necessary to reach the carriage-bridge, drove by on the road across the river, with more waving of hands and shouts of good night. An absolute stillness came as the noise of its wheels died away.

"I've got through that all right," said Cecily with a laugh, drawing her friend with her toward the bridge. "I suppose I shall be quite accustomed to it soon."

They went on to the bridge and halted in the middle of it, by a common impulse as it seemed.

"The sound of a river always says to me that it all doesn't matter much," Cecily went on, leaning on the parapet. "I believe that's been expressed more poetically!"

"It's great nonsense, however it's expressed," observed Mina scornfully.

"I sometimes feel as if it were true." Probably Cecily thought that nobody—no girl—no girl in love—had ever had the feeling before. A delusive appearance of novelty is one of the most dangerous weapons of Cupid. But Mina was an experienced woman—had been married too!"

"Don't talk stuff, my dear," she cried crossly. "And why are we standing on this horrid little bridge?"

She turned round; Cecily still gazed in melancholy abstraction into the stream. Cecily, then, faced down the valley, Mina looked up it; and at the moment the moon showed a quarter of her face and illuminated a streak of the Fillingford road.

The man was there. He was there again. The moonlight fell on his face. He smiled at Mina, pointed a hand toward Blentmouth, and smiled again. He seemed to mock the ignorance of the vanished wagonette. Mina made no sign. He laid his finger on his lips, and nodded slightly toward Cecily. The clouds covered the moon again, and there was no more on the Fillingford road than a black blotch on the deep grey of the night; even this vanished a moment after. And still Cecily gazed down into the Blent.

Presently she turned round. " I suppose we must go in," she said grudgingly. " It's getting rather chilly." They were both in low-cut frocks, and had come out without any wraps. With the intuition of a born schemer Mina seized on the chance.

" Oh, it's so lovely ! " she cried, with an apparently overwhelming enthusiasm for nature. " Too perfectly lovely ! I'll run in and get some cloaks. Wait here till I come back, Cecily."

" Well, don't be long," said Cecily, crossing her bare arms with a little shiver.

Off the Imp ran, and vanished into the house. But she made no search for wraps. After a moment's hesitation in the hall, the deceitful creature ran into the library. All was dark there ; a window was open and showed the bridge, with Cecily's figure on it making a white blur in the darkness. Mina crouched on the window-sill and waited. The absolute unpardonableness of her conduct occurred to her ; with a smile she dismissed the consideration. He—and she—who desires the end must needs put up with the means ; it is all the easier when the means happen to be uncommonly thrilling.

Harry was humbled ! That was the conclusion which shot through her mind. What else could his coming mean ? If it meant less than that, it was mere cruelty. If it meant that—— A keen pang of disappointment shot through her. It was the only way to what she desired, but it was not the way which she would have preferred him to tread. Yet because it was the only way, she wished it—with the reservation that it would have been much better if it could have happened in some other fashion. But anyhow the position, not to say her position, had every element of excitement. " Poor old Mr Neeld ! " she murmured once. It was hard on him to miss this. At the moment Neeld was smiling over the ignorance in which he had been bound to keep her. It is never safe to suppose, however pleasant it may be to believe, that nobody is pitying us ; either of his knowledge or of his ignorance some one is always at it.

She started violently and turned round. The butler was there, candle in hand.

" Is her ladyship still out, ma'am ? " he asked, advancing.

" I was going to lock up." He was hardly surprised to find her—they knew she was odd—and would not have shown it, if he had been.

" Oh, go to bed," she cried in a low voice. " We'll lock up. We don't want anything, anything at all."

" Very good. Good night, ma'am."

What an escape ! Suppose Cecily had seen her at the window !

But Cecily was not looking at the window. She moved to the far end of the bridge and stood gazing up toward Merrion, where one light twinkled in an upper room. Mina saw her stretch out her arms for a moment toward the sky. What had happened ? It was impossible that he had gone away ! Mina craned her head out of the window, looking and listening. Happen what might, be the end of it what it might, the situation was deliciously strong of the Tristrams. They were redeeming their characters ; they had not settled down into the ordinary or been gulfed in the slough of the commonplace. Unexpected appearances and midnight interviews of sentimental moment were still to be hoped for from them. There was not yet an end of all.

He came ; Mina saw his figure on the road, at first dimly, then with a sudden distinctness as a gleam of moonlight shone out. He stood a little way up the road to Cecily's right. She did not see him yet, for she looked up to Merrion. He took a step forward, his tread sounding loud on the road. There was a sudden turn of Cecily's head. A moment's silence followed. He came up to her, holding out his hand. She drew back, shrinking from it. Laying her hands on the gate of the bridge, she seemed to set it as a fence between them. Her voice reached Mina's ears, low, yet as distinct as though she had been by her side, and full of a terrified alarm and a bitter reproach.

" You here ! Oh, you promised, you promised ! "

With a bound Mina's conscience awoke. She had heard what no ears save his had any right to hear. What if she were found ? The conscience was not above asking that, but it was not below feeling an intolerable shame even without the discovery that it suggested as her punishment. Blushing red there in the dark, she slipped from the window-seat and groped

her way to a chair. Here she flung herself down with a sob of excitement and emotion. He had promised. And the promise was broken in his coming.

Now she heard their steps on the path outside ; they were walking toward the house. Telling herself that it was impossible for her to move now, for fear she should encounter them, she sank lower in her armchair.

" Well, where shall we go ? " she heard Cecily ask in cold stiff tones.

" To the Long Gallery," said Harry.

The next moment old Mason the butler was in the room again, this time in great excitement.

" There's some one in the garden with her ladyship, ma'am," he cried. " I think—I think it's my lord ! "

" Who ? " asked Mina, sitting up, feigning to be calm and sleepy.

" Mr Harry, I mean, ma'am."

" Oh ! Well then, go and see."

The old man turned and went out into the hall.

" How are you, Mason ? " she heard Harry say. " Her ladyship and I have some business to talk about. May I have a sandwich afterward ? "

There he was, spoiling the drama, in Mina's humble opinion! Who should think of sandwiches now ?

" Do what Mr Tristram says, Mason," said Cecily.

She heard them begin to mount the stairs. Jumping up, she ran softly to the door and out into the hall. Mason stood there with his candle, staring up after Cecily and Harry. He turned to Mina with a quizzical smile wrinkling his good-natured face.

" You'd think it a funny time for business, wouldn't you, ma'am ? " he asked. He paused a moment, stroking his chin. " Unless you'd happened to be in service twenty years with her late ladyship. Well, I'm glad to see him again, anyhow."

" What shall we do ? " whispered Mina. " Are you going to bed, Mason ? "

" Not me, ma'am. Why, I don't know what mayn't happen before the morning ! " He shook his head in humorous commentary on those he had served. " But there's no call for you to sit up, ma'am."

" I'll thank you to mind your own business, Mason," said the Imp indignantly. " It would be most—most improper if I didn't sit up. Why, it's nearly midnight ! "

" They won't think of that up there," said he.

The sound of a door slammed came from upstairs. Mina's eyes met Mason's for a moment by an involuntary impulse, then hastily turned away. It is an excellent thing to be out of the reach of temptation. The door was shut !

" Give me a candle here in the library," said Mina with all her dignity. And there, in the library, she sat down to wonder and to wait.

Mason went off after the sandwiches, smiling still. There was really nothing odd in it, when once you were accustomed to the family ways.

CHAPTER XXVII

Before Translation

HARRY TRISTRAM had come back to Blent in the mood which belonged to the place as of old—the mood that claimed as his right what had become his by love, knew no scruples if only he could gain and keep it, was ready to play a bold game and take a great chance. He did not argue about what he was going to do. He did not justify it, and perhaps could not. Yet to him what he purposed was so clearly the best thing that Cecily must be forced into it. She could not be forced by force ; if he told her the truth, he would meet at the outset a resistance which he could not quell. He might encounter that after all, later on, in spite of a present success. That was the great risk he was determined to run. At the worst there would be something gained ; if she were and would be nothing else, she should and must at least be mistress of Blent. His imagination had set her in that place ; his pride, no less than his love, demanded it for her. He had gone away once that she might have it. If need be, again he would go away. That stood for decision later.

She walked slowly to the end of the Long Gallery and sat down in the great armchair ; it held its old position in spite of the changes which Harry noted with quick eyes and a suppressed smile as he followed her and set his candle on a table near. He lit two more from it and then turned to her. She was pale and defiant.

" Well," she said, " why are you here ? "

She asked and he gave no excuse for the untimely hour of his visit and no explanation of it. It seemed a small, perhaps indeed a natural, thing to both of them.

" I'm here because I couldn't keep away," he answered gravely, standing before her.

" You promised to keep away. Can't you keep promises ? "

" No, not such promises as that."

" And so you make my life impossible ! You see this room, you see how I've changed it ? I've been changing everything

I could. Why? To forget you, to blot you out, to be rid of you. I've been bringing myself to take my place. To-night I seemed at last to be winning my way to it. Now you come. You gave me all this; why do you make it impossible to me?" A bright colour came on her cheeks now as she grew vehement in her reproaches, and her voice was intense, though low.

A luxury of joy swept over him as he listened. Every taunt witnessed to his power, every reproach to her love. He played a trick indeed and a part, but there was no trick and no acting in so far as he was her lover. If that truth could not redeem his deception, it stifled all sense of guilt.

"And you were forgetting? You were getting rid of me?" he asked, smiling and fixing his eyes on her.

"Perhaps. And now——!" She made a gesture of despair. "Tell me—why have you come?" Her tone changed to entreaty.

"I've come because I must be where you are, because I was mad to send you away before, mad not to come to you before, to think I could live without you, not to see that we two must be together; because you're everything to me." He had come nearer to her now and stood by her. "Ever since I went away I have seen you in this room, in that chair. I think it was your ghost only that came to town." He laughed a moment. "I wouldn't have the ghost. I didn't know why. Now I know. I wanted the you that was here—the real you—as you had been on the night I went away. So I've come back to you. We're ourselves here, Cecily. We Tristrams are ourselves at Blent."

She had listened silently, her eyes on his. She seemed bewildered by the sudden rush of his passion and the enraptured eagerness of his words that made her own vehemence sound to her poor and thin. Pride had its share in her protest, love was the sole spring of his intensity. Yet she was puzzled by the victorious light in his eyes. What he said, what he came to do, was such a surrender as she had never hoped from him; and he was triumphant in surrendering!

The thought flashed through her mind, troubling her and for the time hindering her joy in his confession. She did not trust him yet.

"I've had an offer made to me," he resumed, regaining his

composure. " A sort of political post. If I accept it I shall have to leave England for a considerable time, almost immediately. That brought the thing to a point." Again he laughed. " It's important to you too ; because if you say ' no ' to me to-night, you'll be rid of me for ever so long. Your life won't be made impossible. I shouldn't come to Blent again."

"A post that would take you away ? " she murmured.

" Yes. You'd be left here in peace. I've not come to blackmail you into loving me, Cecily. Yes, you shall be left in peace to move the furniture about." Glancing toward the table, he saw Mr Gainsborough's birthday gift. He took it up, looked at it for a moment, and then replaced it. His manner was involuntarily expressive. Even if she brought that sort of thing to Blent——! He turned back at the sound of a little laugh from Cecily and found her eyes sparkling.

" Father's birthday present, Harry," said she.

Delighted with her mirth, he came to her, holding out his hands. She shook her head and leant back, looking at him.

" Sit as my mother did. You know. Yes, like that ! " he cried.

She had obeyed him with a smile. Not to be denied now, he seized the hand that lay in her lap.

" A birthday ! Yes, of course, you're twenty-one ! Really mistress of it all now ! And you don't know what to do with it, except spoil the arrangement of the furniture ? "

She laughed low and luxuriously. " What am I to do with it ? " she asked.

" Well, won't you give it all to me ? " As he spoke he laughed and kissed her hand. " I've come to ask you for it. Here I am. I've come fortune-hunting to-night."

" It's all mine now, you say ? Harry, take it without me."

" If I did, I'd burn it to the ground that it mightn't remind me of you."

" Yes, yes ! That's what I've wanted to do ! " she exclaimed, drawing her hand out of his and raising her arms a moment in the air. Addie Tristram's pose was gone, but Harry did not miss it now.

" Take it without you indeed ! It's all for you and because of you."

"Really, really?" She grew grave. "Harry, dear, for pity's sake tell me if you love me!"

"Haven't I told you?" he cried gaily. "Where are the poets? Oh, for some good quotations! I'm infernally unpoetical, I know. Is this it—that you're always before my eyes, always in my head, that you're terribly in the way, that when I've got anything worth thinking I think it to you, anything worth doing I do it for you, anything good to say I say it to you? Is this it, that I curse myself and curse you? Is this it, that I know myself only as your lover and that if I'm not that, then I seem nothing at all. I've never been in love before, but all that sounds rather like it."

"And you'll take Blent from me?"

"Yes, as the climax of all, I'll take Blent from you."

To her it seemed the climax, the thing she found hardest to believe, the best evidence for the truth of those extravagant words which sounded so sweet in her ears. Harry saw this, but he held on his way. Nay, now he himself forgot his trick, and could still have gone on had there been none, had he in truth been accepting Blent from her hands. Even at the price of pride he would have had her now.

She rose suddenly, and began to walk to and fro across the end of the room, while he stood by the table watching her.

"Well, isn't it time you said something to me?" he suggested with a smile.

"Give me time, Harry, give me time. The world's all changed to-night. You—yes, you came suddenly out of the darkness of the night,"—she waved her hand toward the window—"and changed the world for me. How am I to believe it? And if I can believe it, what can I say? Let me alone for a minute, Harry dear."

He was well content to wait and watch. All time seemed before them, and how better could he fill it? He seemed himself to suffer in this hour a joyful transformation; to know better why men lived and loved to live, to reach out to the full strength and the full function of his being. The world changed for him as he changed it for her.

Twice and thrice she had paced the gallery before she came and stood opposite to him. She put her hands up to

her throat, saying: "I'm stifled—stifled with happiness, Harry."

For answer he sprang forward and caught her in his arms. In the movement he brushed roughly against the table, there was a little crash, and poor Mr Gainsborough's birthday gift lay smashed to bits on the floor. For the second time their love bore hard on Mr Gainsborough's crockery. Startled they turned to look, and then they both broke into merry laughter. The trumpery thing had seemed a sign to them, and now the sign was broken. Their first kiss was mirthful over its destruction.

With a sigh of joy she disengaged herself from him.

"That's settled then," said Harry. He paused a moment. "You had Janie and Bob Broadley here to-night? I saw them as I lay hidden by the road. Does that kind of engagement attract you, Cecily?"

"Ours won't be like that," she said, laughing triumphantly.

"Don't let's have one at all," he suggested, coming near to her again. "Let's have no engagement. Just a wedding."

"What?" she cried.

"It must be a beastly time," he went on, "and all the talk there's been about us will make it more beastly still. Fancy Miss S. and all the rest of them! And—do you particularly want to wait? What I want is to be settled down, here with you."

Her eyes sparkled as she listened; she was in the mood, she was of the stuff, for any adventure.

"I should like to run off with you now," said he. "I don't want to leave you at all, you see."

"Run off now?" She gave a joyful little laugh. "That's just what I should like!"

"Then we'll do it," he declared. "Well, to-morrow morning anyhow."

"Do you mean it?" she asked.

"Do you say 'no' to it?"

She drew herself up with pride. "I say 'no' to nothing that you ask of me."

Their hands met again as she declared her love and trust. "You've really come to me?" he heard her murmur. "Back to Blent and back to me?"

"Yes," he answered, smiling. She had brought into his mind again the truth she did not know. He had no time to think of it, for she offered him her lips again. The moment when he might have told her thus went by. It was but an impulse; for he still loved what he was doing, and took delight in the risks of it. And he could not bear so to impair her joy. Soon she must know, but she should not yet be robbed of her joy that it was she who could bring him back to Blent. For him in his knowledge, for her in her ignorance, there was an added richness of pleasure that he would not throw away, even although now he believed that were the truth known she would come to him still. Must not that be, since now he, even he, would come to her, though the truth had been otherwise?

"There's a train from Fillingford at eight in the morning. I'm going back there to-night. I've got a fly waiting by the Pool—if the man hasn't gone to sleep and the horse run away. Will you meet me there? We'll go up to town and be married as soon as we can—the day after to-morrow, I suppose."

"And then——?"

"Oh, then just come back here. We can go nowhere but here, Cecily."

"Just come back and——!"

"And let them find it out, and talk, and talk, and talk!" he laughed.

"It would be delightful!" she cried.

"Nobody to know till it's done!"

"Yes, yes, I like it like that. Not father even, though?"

"You'll be gone before he's up. Leave a line for him."

"But I—I can't go alone with you."

"Why not?" asked Harry, seeming a trifle vexed.

"I'll tell you!" she cried. "Let's take Mina with us, Harry!"

He laughed; the Imp was the one person whose presence he was ready to endure. Indeed there would perhaps be a piquancy in that.

"All right. An elopement made respectable by Mina!" He had a touch of scorn even for mitigated respectability.

"Shall we call her and tell her now?"

"Well, are you tired of this interview?"

" I don't know whether I want it to go on, or whether I must go and tell somebody about it."

" I shouldn't hesitate," smiled Harry.

" You ? No. But I—— Oh, Harry dear, I want to whisper my triumph."

" But we must be calm and business-like about it now."

" Yes ! " She entered eagerly into the fun. " That'll puzzle Mina even more."

" We're not doing anything unusual," he insisted with affected gravity.

" No—not for our family at least."

" It's just the obvious thing to do."

" Oh, it's just the delicious thing too ! " She almost danced in gaiety. " Let me call Mina. Do ! "

" Not for a moment, as you love me ! Give me a moment more."

" Oh, Harry, there'll be no end to that ! "

" I don't know why there should be."

" We should miss the train at Fillingford ! "

" Ah, if it means that ! "

" Or I shall come sleepy and ugly to it ; and you'd leave me on the platform and go away ! "

" Shout for Mina—now—without another word ! "

" Oh, just one more," she pleaded, laughing.

" I can't promise to be moderate."

" Come, we'll go and find her. Give me your hand." She caught his hand in hers, and snatched the candle from the table. She held it high above her head, looking round the room and back to his eyes again. " My home now, because my love is here," she said. " Mine and yours, and yours and mine—and both the same thing, Harry, now."

He listened smiling. Yes, it would be the same thing now.

There they stood together for a moment, and together they sighed as they turned away. To them the room was sacred now, as it had always been beautiful ; in it their love seemed to lie enshrined.

They went downstairs together full of merriment, the surface expression of their joy. " Look grave," he whispered, setting his face in a comical exaggeration of seriousness. Cecily tried to obey and tumbled into a gurgle of delight.

" I will directly," she gasped as they came to the hall. Mason stood there waiting.

" I've put the sandwiches here, and the old brown, my lord."

Harry alone noticed the slip in his address—and Harry took no notice of it.

" I shall be glad to meet the old brown again," he said, smiling. Mason gave the pair a benevolent glance and withdrew to his quarters.

Mina strolled out of the library with an accidental air. Harry had sat down to his sandwiches and old brown. Cecily ran across to Mina and kissed her.

" We're going to be married ! " she whispered. She had told it all in a sentence ; yet she added : " Oh, I've such a heap of things to tell you, Mina ! " Was not all that scene in the Long Gallery to be reproduced—doubtless only in a faint adumbration of its real glory, yet with a sense of recovering it and living it again ?

" No ? " cried Mina. " Oh, how splendid ! Soon ? "

Harry threw a quick glance at Cecily. She responded by assuming a demure calmness of demeanour.

" Not as soon as we could wish," said Harry, munching and sipping. " In fact, not before the day after to-morrow, I'm afraid, Madame Zabriska."

" The day after—— ? "

" What I have alway hated is Government interference. Why can't I be married when I like ? Why have I to get a license and all that nonsense ? Why must I wait till the day after to-morrow ? " He grew indignant.

" It's past twelve now ; it is to-morrow," said Cecily.

" Quite so. As you suggest, Cecily, we could be married to-day but for these absurd restrictions. There's a train at eight from Fillingford——"

" You're going—both of you—by that ? " Mina cried.

" I hope it suits you, because we want you to come with us, if you'll be so kind," said Harry.

" You see it would look just a little unusual if we went alone," added Cecily.

" And it's not going to look unusual anyhow ? Are you mad ? Or—or do you mean it ? "

" Don't you think both may be true ? " asked Harry. Cecily's gravity broke down. She kissed Mina again, laughing in an abandonment of exultation.

" Oh, you're both mad ! "

" Not at all. You're judging us by the standard of your other engaged couple to-night."

" Did Mr Neeld know anything about your coming ? " Mina demanded, with a sudden recollection.

" Nothing at all. Did he say anything to you ? " For a moment the glass of old brown halted on its way to his lips, and he glanced at Mina sharply.

" No. But when I asked him if he had seen you he looked —well, just rather funny."

The old brown resumed its progress. Harry was content.

" There's no better meal than fresh sandwiches and old brown," he observed. " You'll come with us, won't you, and keep Cecily company at the little house till we fix it up ? "

Mina looked from one to the other in new amazement, with all her old excited pleasure in the Tristram ways. They did a thing—and they did not spoil it by explanations.

" And Mr Gainsborough ? " she asked.

" We're going to leave a note for father," smiled Cecily.

" You're always doing that," objected Mina.

" It seems rather an early train for Mr Gainsborough," Harry suggested, laying down his napkin.

" Oh, why don't you tell me something about it ? " cried Mina despairingly. " But it's true ? The great thing's true anyhow, isn't it ? "

" Well, what do you think I came down from town for ? " inquired Harry.

" And why have we been so long in the Gallery, Mina ? "

" You've given in then ? " exclaimed the Imp, pointing a finger in triumph at Harry.

" Mina, how can you say a thing like that ? "

" It looks as if it were true enough," admitted Harry.

" Really I must go," he added. " I can't keep that fly all night. I shall see you in the morning, Madame Zabriska. Eight o'clock at Fillingford ! "

" I'm really to go with you ? " she gasped.

"Yes, yes, I thought all that was settled," said he, rather impatiently. "Bring a pretty frock. I want my wedding to be done handsomely—in a style that suits the wedding of——" He looked at Cecily—"of Lady Tristram of Blent."

"Cecily, it's not all a joke?"

"Yes!" cried Cecily. "All a delicious, delicious joke! But we're going to be married."

After a moment's hesitation Mina came across to Harry, holding out her hands. "I'm glad, I'm so glad," she murmured, with a little catch in her voice.

He took her hands and pressed them; he looked at her very kindly, though he smiled still.

"Yes, it undoes all the mistakes, doesn't it?" he said. "At least I hope it will," he added the next moment with a laugh.

"It's really the only way to be married," declared Cecily.

"Well, for you people—for you extraordinary Tristrams—I dare say it is," said Mina.

"You'll come?" Cecily implored.

"She couldn't keep away," mocked Harry. "She's got to see the end of us."

"Yes, and our new beginning. Oh, what Blent's going to be, Mina! If you don't come with us now, we won't let you stay at Merrion."

"I'm coming," said Mina. Indeed she would not have stayed away. If she had needed further inducement the next moment supplied it.

"You're to be our only confidant," said Harry.

"Yes! Till it's all over, nobody's to know but you, Mina."

The Imp was hit on her weak spot. She was tremulously eager to go.

"Eight o'clock! Oh, can we be ready, Cecily?"

"Of course we shall be ready," said Cecily scornfully.

Harry had taken his hat from the table and came up to shake hands. He was imperturbably calm and business-like.

"Don't run it too fine," he said. "Good night, Madame Zabriska."

She gave him her hand and he held it for a moment. He grew a little grave, but there was still a twinkle in his eye.

" You're a good friend," he said. " I shall come on you again, if I want you, you know." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

" I don't know that I care much about anything except you two," stammered Mina.

He gripped her hand again. She seemed well paid. He held out his hand to Cecily. Mina understood.

" I shall be up a little while, Cecily. Come to me before you go to bed," she said ; and she stood in the hall, watching them as they walked out together. There was joy in her heart—aye, and envy. The two brought tears to her eyes and struggled which should make the better claim to them. " But they do like me ! " she said in a plaintive yet glad little cry, as she was left alone in the silent old hall.

So still was the night that a man might hear the voice of his heart and a girl the throb of hers. And they were alone ; or only the friendly murmur of old Blent was with them, seeming to whisper congratulations on their joy. Her arm was through his, very white on his sleeve, and she leant on him heavily.

" After tempests, dear," said he.

" There shall be no more, no more, Harry."

" Oh, I don't know that. I shall like you in them perhaps. And there may be one more, anyhow."

" You're laughing, Harry ? "

" Why, yes, at anything just now."

" Yes, at anything," she murmured. " I could laugh—or cry—at anything just now."

They came to the little bridge and passed on to it.

" We talked here the first evening," said she. " And how you puzzled me ! It began for me then, dear Harry."

" Yes, and for me a little sooner—by the Pool for me. I was keeping you out of your own then."

" Never mine unless it could be yours too."

Fallen into silence again, they reached the road and, moved by the same instinct, turned to look back at Blent. The grip of her hand tightened on his arm.

" There's nothing that would make you leave me ? " she whispered.

" Not you yourself, I think," said he.

" It's very wonderful," she breathed. " Listen ! There's no sound. Yes, after tempests, Harry ! "

" I am glad of it all," he said suddenly and in a louder tone. " I've been made a man, and I've found you, the woman for me. It was hard at the time, but I am glad of it. It has come and it has gone, and I'm glad of it."

He had spoken unwarily in saying it was gone. But she thought he spoke of his struggle only and his hesitation, not of their cause.

" You gave when you might have kept ; it is always yours, Harry. Oh, and what is it all now ? No, no, it's something still. It's in us—in us both, I think."

He stopped on the road.

" Come no further. The fly's only a little way on, and while I see you, I will see nobody else to-night. Till the morning, dearest—and you won't fail ? "

" No, I won't fail. Should I fail to greet my first morning ? "

He pushed the hair a little back from her forehead and kissed her brow.

" God do so unto me and more also if my love ever fails you," said he. " Kiss me as I kissed you. And so good night."

She obeyed and let him go. Once and twice he looked back at her as he took his way and she stood still on the road. She heard his voice speaking to the flyman, the flyman's exhortation to his horse, the sounds of the wheels receding along the road. Then slowly she went back.

" This is what they mean," she murmured to herself. " This is what they mean." It was the joy past expression, the contentment past understanding. And all in one evening they had sprung up for her out of a barren thirsty land. Blent had never been beautiful before nor the river sparkled as it ran ; youth was not known before, and beauty had been thrown away. The world was changed ; and it was very wonderful.

When Cecily went into her the Imp was packing ; with critical care she stowed her smartest frock in the trunk.

" I must be up early and see about the carriage," she remarked. " I dare say Mason—— But you're not listening, Cecily ! "

" No, I wasn't listening," said Cecily, scorning apology or excuse.

" You people in love are very silly. That's the plain English of it," observed Mina loftily.

Cecily looked at her a minute, then stretched her arms and sighed in luxurious weariness. " I dare say that's the plain English of it," she admitted. " But, oh, how different it sounds before translation, dear ! "

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Cat and the Bell

MR GAINSBOROUGH lost his head. He might have endured the note that had been left for him—it said only that his daughter had gone to town for a couple of days with Mina Zabriska ; besides he had had notes left for him before. But there was Mason's account of the evening and of the morning—of Harry's arrival, of the conference in the Long Gallery, of the sandwiches and the old brown, of the departure of the ladies at seven o'clock. Mason was convinced that something was up ; knowing Mr Harry as he did, and her late ladyship as he had, he really would not like to hazard an opinion what ; Mr Gainsborough, however, could see for himself that candles had been left to burn themselves out and that china had been broken in the Long Gallery. Availing himself dexterously of his subordinate position, Mason was open to state facts but respectfully declined to draw inferences. Gainsborough rushed off to the Long Gallery. There lay his bit of Chelsea on the floor—upset, smashed, not picked up ! There must have been a convulsion indeed, he declared, as ruefully and tenderly he gathered the fragments.

Quite off his balance and forgetful of perils, he ordered the pony-chaise and had himself driven into Blentmouth. He felt that he must tell somebody, and borrow some conclusions —he was not equal to making any of his own. He must carry the news.

He deceived himself and did gross injustice to the neighbourhood. Fillingford is but twelve miles inland from Blentmouth, and there are three hours between eight and eleven. He was making for Fairholme. While yet half a mile off he overtook Miss Swinkerton, heading in the same direction, ostentatiously laden with savings-bank books. With much decision she requested a lift, got in, and told him all about how Harry had escorted Cecily and Madame Zabriska from Fillingford that morning. The milkman had told the butcher, the butcher had told the postman, the postman had told her, and—well,

she had mentioned it to Mrs Trumbler. Mrs Trumbler was at Fairholme now.

" Mr Tristram had been staying with you, of course ? How nice to think there's no feeling of soreness ! " observed Miss S.

In Gainsborough at least there was no feeling save of bewilderment.

" Staying with us ? No, I haven't so much as seen him," he stammered out.

Immediately Miss S. was upon him, and by the time they reached Fairholme had left him with no more than a few rags of untold details. Then with unrivalled effrontery she declared that she had forgotten to call at the grocer's, and marched off. In an hour the new and complete version of the affair was all over the town. Mrs Trumbler had got first to Fairholme, but she did not wrest the laurels from Miss S.'s brow. The mere departure from Fillingford shrank to nothing in comparison with the attendant circumstances supplied by Mr Gainsborough.

" They don't know what to think at Fairholme," Mrs Trumbler reported.

" I dare say not, my dear," said Miss S. grimly.

" They were dining there that very night, and not a word was said about it ; and none of them saw Mr Tristram. He came quite suddenly, and went off again with Lady Tristram.

" And Mina Zabriska, my dear."

Mina complicated the case. Those who were inclined to believe, against all common-sense, that Cecily had eloped with her cousin—Why, in Heaven's name, elope, when you have all the power and a negligible parent ?—stumbled over Mina. Well, then, was it with Mina Harry had eloped ? Miss S. threw out hints in this direction. Why then Cecily ? Miss S. was not at a loss. She said nothing, no ; but if it should turn out that Cecily's presence was secured as a protection against the wrath of Major Duplay (who, everybody knew, hated Harry), she, Miss S., would be less surprised than many of those who concerned themselves to know everything. A Cecily party and a Mina party grew up—and a third party, who would have none of either, and declared that they had their own ideas, and that time would show.

Gossip raged, and old Mr Neeld sat in the middle of the conflagration. How his record of evasion, nay, of downright

falsehood, mounted up! False facts and fictitious reasons flowed from his lips. There was pathos in the valour with which he maintained his position; he was hard pressed, but he did not fall. There was a joy too in the fight. For he alone of all Blentmouth knew the great secret, and guessed that what was happening had to do with the secret. Harry had asked silence for a week; before two days of it were gone came this news.

"If they do mean to be married," said Janie, "why couldn't they do it decently?" She meant with the respectable deliberation of her own alliance.

"Tristram's a queer fellow," pondered Bob Broadley.

"I only hope he isn't rushing her into it—on purpose. What do you think, Mr Neeld?"

"My dear Janie——"

"He may not want to give her time to think. It's not a good match for her now, is it?"

"I—I can't think that Harry Tristram would——"

"Well, Neeld," said Iver judicially, "I'm not so sure. Master Harry can play a deep game when he likes. I know that very well—and to my cost too."

What Janie hinted and Iver did not discard was a view which found some supporters; and where it was entertained, poor Mina Zabriska's character was gone. Miss S. herself was all but caught by the idea, and went so far as to say that she had never thought highly of Madame Zabriska, while the Major was known to be impecunious. There was a nefariousness about the new suggestion that proved very attractive in Blentmouth.

Late in the day came fresh tidings, new fuel for the flames. Mr Gainsborough had driven again into Blentmouth and taken the train for London. Two portmanteaux and a wicker-crate, plausibly conjectured to contain between them all his worldly possessions, had accompanied him on the journey. He was leaving Blent then, if not for ever, at least for a long while. He had evaded notice in his usual fashion, and nearly driven over Miss S. when she tried to get in the way. Miss S. was partly consoled by a bit of luck that followed. She met Mina's cook, come down from Merrion to buy household stores; her mistress was to return to her own house on the morrow!

There seemed uo need to search for inferences. They leapt to light. Either Blent was to be shut up, or it was to receive a wedded pair. On this alternative the factions split, and the battle was furious. Mrs Trumbler definitely fought Miss S. for the first time in her life. On one point only the whole town agreed ; it was being cheated—either out of the wedding which was its right, or else out of the ball in the winter to which Miss S. had irrevocably committed Lady Tristram. The popularity of Blent fell to nothing in the neighbourhood.

The next morning Mr Neeld gained the reward of virtue, and became a hero in spite of his discretion. At breakfast he received a telegram. Times were critical, and all eyes were on him as he read, and re-read, and frowned perplexedly. Then he turned to Iver.

" Can you let me have a trap this afternoon, Iver ? "

" Of course, of course. But you're not going to leave us, I hope ? "

" Only just for the evening ; I—in fact I have to go to Blent."

There was a moment's silence. Glances were exchanged, while Neeld made half-hearted efforts to grapple with an egg. Then Bob Broadley broke out with a laugh.

" Oh, hang it all, out with it, Mr Neeld ! "

" Well, I'm not told to be silent ; and it must become known immediately. Madame Zabriska telegraphs to me that they are to be married early this morning, and will come to Blent by the 1.30 train. She herself leaves by the 11 o'clock, will be there at five, and wishes me to join her."

" By Jove, he's done it then ! " exclaimed Iver.

Everybody looked very solemn except Neeld, who was sadly confused.

" Dear, dear ! " murmured Mrs Iver.

" She must be very much in love with him," remarked Janie.

" It's his conduct more than hers which needs explanation," Iver observed drily. " And what do they want you for, Neeld ? " If his tone and his question were not very flattering, they were excused by the obvious fact that there was no sort of reason for wanting Mr Neeld—or at any rate seemed to all that party to be none.

"Oh—er—why—why no doubt it's—it's only a fancy of Mina Zabriska's."

"A very queer fancy," said Janie Iver coldly. It was really a little annoying that old Mr Neeld should be the person wanted at Blent.

"I'll drive you over," Bob kindly volunteered.

"Er—thank you, Broadley, but she asks me to come alone."

"Well, I'm hanged!" muttered Bob, who had seen a chance of being in at the death.

They were coming straight down to Blent. That fact assumed an important place in Neeld's review of the situation. And his presence was requested. He put these two things together. They must mean that the secret was to be told that evening at Blent, and that he was to be vouched as evidence, if by chance Cecily asked for it. On the very day of the wedding the truth was to be revealed. In ignorance, perhaps in her own despite, she had been made in reality what she had conceived herself to be; to-day she was Lady Tristram in law. Now she was to be told. Neeld saw the choice that would be laid before her, and, at the same time, the use that had been made of his silence. He fell into a sore puzzle. Yes, Harry could play a deep game when he chose.

"It's quite impossible to justify either the use he's made of me or the way he's treated her," he concluded sadly. "I shall speak very seriously to him about it." But he knew that the serious speaking, however comforting it might be to himself as a protest, would fall very lightly on Harry Tristram's ears; their listening would be for the verdict of another voice.

"Do you think Disney will repeat his offer—will give him a chance of reconsidering now?" asked Iver, who had heard of that affair from Lord Southend.

"I'm sure he wouldn't accept anything," Neeld answered with remarkable promptitude and conviction. It was a luxury to find an opportunity of speaking the truth.

"The least he could do would be to leave that to her."

"She'd say just the same," Neeld assured him. "I'm convinced there'll be no question of anything of the kind."

"Then it's very awkward," Iver grumbled crossly.

In all his varied experience of the Imp—which included, it may be remembered, a good deal of plain-speaking and

one embrace—Neeld had never found her in such a state as governed her this evening. Mason gave him tea while she walked restlessly about; he gathered that Mason was dying to talk but had been sore wounded in an encounter with Mina already, and was now perforce holding his tongue.

"They'll be here by seven, and you and I are to dine with them," she told him. "Quite informally."

"Dear me, I—I don't think I want——" he began.

"Hush!" she interrupted. "Are you going to be all day with those things, Mason?"

"I hope I haven't been slower than usual, ma'am," said Mason very stiffly.

At last he went. In an instant Mina darted across to Neeld, and caught him by the arm. "What have you to tell me?" she cried.

"To tell you? I? Oh, dear, no, Madame Zabriska! I assure you——"

"Oh, there's no need for that! Harry said you were to tell me before they arrived; that's why I sent for you now."

"He said I was to tell you——?"

"Yes, yes. Something you knew and I didn't; something that would explain it all."

She stood before him with clasped hands. "It's quite true; he did say so," she pleaded. "It's all been so delightful, and yet so strange; and he told me to be ready either to stay here or to go home to-night! Tell me, tell me, Mr Neeld!"

"Why didn't he tell you himself?"

"I only saw him alone for an instant after the wedding; and before it he didn't say a word about there being anything to tell. There's a secret. What is it?"

He was glad to tell it. He had carried his burden long enough.

"We've all made a great blunder. Harry is Lord Tristram after all."

Mina stood silent for a moment. "Oh!" she gasped. "And he's married Cecily without telling her?"

"That's what he has done, I regret to say. And I take it that he means to tell her to-night."

Mina sank into a chair. "What will she do?" she murmured. "What will she do?"

"There was a mistake—or rather a fraud—about the date of Sir Randolph Edge's death; his brother knew it. I'll tell you the details if you like. But that's the end and the sum of it. As to why he didn't tell—er—his wife sooner, perhaps you know better than I."

"Yes, I know that," she said. And then—it was most inconsiderate, most painful to Mr Neeld—she began to cry. Unable to bear this climax of excitement coming on the top of her two days' emotion, she sobbed hysterically. "They'll be here at seven!" she moaned. "What will happen? Oh, Mr Neeld! And I know he'll expect me to be calm and—and to carry it off—and be composed. How can I be?"

"Perhaps a glass of sherry——?" was Mr Neeld's not unreasonable suggestion.

No, the old brown would not serve here. But without its aid a sudden change came over Mina. She sprang to her feet and left the tears to roll down her cheeks untended as she cried:

"What a splendid thing to do! Oh, how like Harry! And it's to be settled to-night! What can we do to make it go right?"

"I intend to take no responsibility at all," protested Neeld. "I'm here to speak to the facts if I'm wanted, but——"

"Oh, bother the facts! What are we to do to make her take it properly?" She gave another sob. "Oh, I'm an idiot!" she cried. "Haven't you anything to suggest, Mr Neeld?"

He shrugged his shoulders peevishly. Her spirits fell again.

"I see! Yes, if she—if she doesn't take it properly, he'll go away again, and I'm to be ready to stay here." Another change in the barometer came in a flash. "But she can't help being Lady Tristram now!"

"It's all a most unjustifiable proceeding. He tricks the girl——"

"Yes, he had to. That was the only chance. If he'd told her before——"

"But isn't she in love with him?"

"Oh, you don't know the Tristrams! Oh, what are we to do?" Save running through every kind and degree of emotion, Mina seemed to find nothing to do.

" And I'm bound to say that I consider our position most embarrassing." Mr Neeld spoke with some warmth, with some excuse too perhaps. To welcome a newly-married couple home may be thought always to require some tact ; when it is a toss-up whether they will not part again for ever under your very eyes the situation is not improved. Such trials should not be inflicted on quiet old bachelors ; Josiah Cholderton had not done with his editor yet.

" We must treat it as a mere trifle," the Imp announced, fixing on the thing which above all others she could not achieve. Yet her manner was so confident that Neeld gasped. " And if that doesn't do, we must tell her that the happiness of her whole life depends on what she does to-night." Variety of treatment was evidently not to be lacking.

" I intend to take no responsibility of any kind. He's got himself into a scrape. Let him get out of it," persisted Neeld.

" I thought you were his friend ? "

" I may be excused if I consider the lady a little too."

" I suppose I don't care for Cecily ? Do you mean that, Mr Neeld ? "

" My dear friend, need we quarrel too ? "

" Don't be stupid. Who's quarrelling ? I never knew anybody so useless as you are. Can't you do anything but sit there and talk about responsibilities ? " She was ranging about, a diminutive tiger of unusually active habits. She had wandered round the room again before she burst out :

" Oh, but it's something to see the end of it ! "

That was his feeling too, however much he might rebuke himself for it. Human life at first-hand had not been too plentiful with him. The Imp's excitement infected him. " And he's back here after all ! " she cried. " At least— Heavens, they'll be here directly, Mr Neeld ! "

" Yes, it's past seven," said he.

" Come into the garden. We'll wait for them on the bridge." She turned to him as they passed through the hall. " Wouldn't you like something of this sort to happen to you ? " she asked.

No. He was perturbed enough as a spectator ; he would not have been himself engaged in the play.

" Why isn't everybody here ? " she demanded, with a laugh that was again nervous and almost hysterical. " Why isn't Addie Tristram here ? Ah, and your old Cholderton ? "

" Hark, I hear wheels on the road," said Mr Neeld.

Mina looked hard at him. " She shall do right," she said, " and Harry shall not go."

" Surely they'll make the best of a—— ? "

" Oh, we're not talking of your Ivers and your Broadleys ! " she interrupted indignantly. " If they were like that, we should never have been where we are at all."

How true it was, how lamentably true ! One had to presuppose Addie Tristram, and turns of fortune or of chance wayward as Addie herself—and to reckon with the same blood, now in young and living veins.

" I can't bear it," whispered Mina.

" He'll expect you to be calm and composed," Neeld reminded her.

" Then give me a cigarette," she implored despairingly.

" I am not a smoker," said Mr Neeld.

" Oh, you really are the very last man—— ! Well, come on the bridge," groaned Mina.

They waited on the bridge, and the wheels drew near. They spoke no more. They had found nothing to do. They could only wait. A fly came down the road.

There they sat, side by side. Cecily was leaning forward, her eyes were eager, and there was a bright touch of colour on her cheeks ; Harry leant back, looking at her, not at Blent. He wore a quiet smile ; his air was very calm. He saw Mina and Neeld, and waved his hand to them. The fly stopped opposite the bridge. He jumped out and assisted Cecily to alight. In a moment she was in Mina's arms. The next, she recognized Neeld's presence with a little cry of surprise. At a loss to account for himself, the old man stood there in embarrassed wretchedness.

" I want you to wait," said Harry to the driver. " Put up in the stables, and they'll give you something to eat. You must wait till I send you word."

" Wait ? Why is he to wait, Harry ? " asked Cecily. Her tone was gay ; she was overflowing with joy and merriment. " Who's going away ? Oh, is it you, Mr Neeld ? "

" I—I have a trap from Mr Iver's," he stammered.

" I may want to send a message," Harry explained. " Kind of you to come, Mr Neeld."

" I—I must wish you joy," said Neeld, taking refuge in conventionality.

" We've had a capital journey down, haven't we, Cecily ? And I'm awfully hungry. What time is it ? "

Mason was rubbing his hands in the doorway.

" Dinner's ordered at eight, sir," said he.

" And it's half-past seven now. Just time to wash our hands. No dress to-night, you know."

" I'll go to my room," said Cecily. " Will you come with me, Mina ? "

A glance from Harry made the Imp excuse herself. " I'll keep Mr Neeld company," she said.

Cecily turned to her husband. She smiled and blushed a little.

" I'll take you as far as your room," said he.

Mina and Neeld watched them go upstairs ; then each dropped into a chair in the hall. Mason passed by, chuckling to himself ; Neeld looked harmless, and he dared to speak to him.

" Well, this is the next best thing to Mr Harry coming back to his own, sir," said he.

That was it. That was the feeling. Mason had got it !

" I'm glad of it after all," Neeld confessed to Mina.

" Wait, wait ! " she urged, sitting straight in her chair, apparently listening for any sound. Her obvious anxiety extended its contagion to him ; he understood better how nice the issue was.

" Will you come in the garden with me after dinner ? " asked Harry, as Cecily and he went upstairs.

" Of course—when they've gone."

" No, directly. I want to say a word to you."

" We must escape then ! " she laughed. " Oh, well, they'll expect that, I suppose." Her delight in her love bubbled over in her laugh.

They came to the door of her room, and she stopped.

" Here ? " asked Harry. " Yes, it was my mother's room. You reign now in my mother's stead."

His voice had a ring of triumph in it. He kissed her hand. " Dinner as soon as you're ready," said he.

She laughed again and blushed as she opened the door and stood holding the handle.

" Won't you come in—just for a minute, Harry ? I—I haven't changed this room at all."

" All is yours to change or to keep unchanged," said he.

" Oh, I've no reason for changing anything now. Everything's to be put back in the Long Gallery ! " She paused, and then said again : " Won't you come in for just a minute, Harry ? "

" I must go back to our friends downstairs," he answered.

The pretext was threadbare. What did the guests matter ? They would do well enough. It had cost her something to ask—a little effort—since the request still seemed so strange, since its pleasure had a fear in it. And now she was refused.

" I ask you," she said, with a sudden haughtiness.

He stood looking at her a moment. There was a brisk step along the corridor.

" Oh, I beg your ladyship's pardon. I didn't know your ladyship had come upstairs." It was Cecily's maid.

" In about twenty minutes," said Harry with a nod. Slowly Cecily followed the maid inside.

After he had washed his hands Harry rejoined his friends. They were still sitting in the hall with an air of expectancy.

" You've told her ? " cried Mina. " Oh, yes, Mr Neeld has told me everything."

" Well, I've mentioned the bare fact——" Neeld began.

" Yes, yes, that's the only thing that matters. You've told her, Harry ? " The last two days made him ' Harry ' and her ' Mina.'

" No, I had a chance and I—funked it," said Harry, slow in speech and slow in smile. " She asked me into her room. Well, I wouldn't go."

He laughed as he spoke, laughed rather scornfully.

" It's rather absurd. I shall be all right after dinner," he added, laughing still. " Or would you like to do the job for me, Mina ? "

The Imp shook her head with immense determination. " I'll throw myself into the Blent if you like," she said.

" What about you, Mr Neeld ? "

" My dear friend, oh, my dear friend ! " Undisguised panic took possession of Mr Neeld. He tried to cover it by saying sternly : " This—er—preposterous position is entirely your own fault, you know. You have acted——"

" Yes, I know," nodded Harry, not impatiently but with a sombre assent. He roused himself the next moment, saying : " Well, somebody's got to bell the cat, you know."

" Really, it's not my business," protested Neeld and Mina in one breath, both laughing nervously.

" You like the fun, but you don't want any of the work," remarked Harry.

That was true, true to their disgrace. They both felt the reproach. How were they better than the rest of the neighbourhood, who were content to gossip and gape and take the fortunes of the Tristrams as mere matter for their own entertainment ?

" I've made you look ashamed of yourselves now," he laughed. " Well, I must do the thing myself, I suppose. What a pity Miss Swinkerton isn't here ! "

Cecily came down. She passed Harry with a rather distant air and took Neeld's arm.

" They say dinner's ready," said she. " Mina, will you come with Harry ? "

Harry sank into the chair opposite Cecily—and opposite the picture of Addie Tristram on the wall. " Well, somehow I've managed to get back here," said he.

The shadow had passed from Cecily's face. She looked at him, blushing and laughing.

" At a terrible price, poor Harry ? " she said.

" At a big price," he answered.

She looked round at the three. Harry was composed, but there was no mistaking the perturbation of the Imp and Mr Neeld.

" A big price ? " she asked wonderingly. " Isn't that a queer compliment, Harry ? " Then a light seemed to break in on her, and she cried : " You mean the cost of your pride ? I should never let that stand between you and me ! "

" Will you make a note of that admission, Mina ? " said Harry with a smile. " Because you didn't say so always, Cecily. Do you recollect what you once said ? ' If ever

the time comes, I shall remember!' That was what you said."

She looked at him with a glance that was suddenly troubled. There seemed a meaning in his words. She pushed back her chair and rose from the table.

"I don't want dinner. I'm going into the garden," she said.

They sat still as she went out. Harry refolded his napkin and slowly rose to his feet. "I should have liked it better after dinner," he observed.

Mina and Mr Neeld sat on.

"Are we to dine?" whispered Neeld. There is the body, after all.

"Oh, yes, sir," came in Mason's soothing tones over his shoulder. "We never waited for her late ladyship." And he handed soup.

"Really Mason is rather a comfort," thought Mr Neeld. The Imp drank a glass of champagne.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Curmudgeon

IN his most business-like tones, with no more gesture than a pointing of his finger now and then, or an occasional wave of his hand, Harry detailed the circumstances. He was methodical and accurate ; he might have been opening a case in the law-courts, and would have earned a compliment on his lucidity. There was something ludicrous in this treatment of the matter, but he remained very grave, although quite unemotional.

" What was my position then ? " he asked. " I remembered what you'd said. I saw the pull I'd given you. If I'd told you before, you'd have had nothing to do with me. You'd have taken a tragic delight in going back to your little house. I should have given you your revenge."

" So you cheated me ? It shows the sort of person you are ! "

He went on as though he had not heard her indignant ejaculation.

" I had fallen in love with you—with you and with the idea of your being here. I couldn't have anybody else at Blent, and I had to have you. It was impossible for me to turn you out. I don't think it would have been gentlemanly."

" It was more gentlemanly to marry me on false pretences ? "

" Well, perhaps not, but a form of ungentlemanliness less repulsive to me—Oh, just to me personally. I don't know whether you quite understand yet why I gave up Blent to you. Just the same feeling has made me do this—with the addition, of course, that I'm more in love with you now."

" I don't believe it, or you'd have trusted me—trusted my love for you."

" I've trusted it enormously—trusted it to forgive me this deceit."

" If you had come and told me——"

" At the very best you'd have taken months."

" And you couldn't wait for me ? "

" Well, waiting's a thing I detest."

" Oh, I've made up my mind," she declared. " I shall go back to town to-night."

" No, no, that's not it." Harry did not want the arrangement misunderstood. " If we can't agree, I go back to town —not you. I kept my fly."

" You needn't make fun of it anyhow."

" I'm not. I'm quite serious. You stay here, I go away. I accept this post abroad—the Arbitration business. I've got to send an answer about it to-morrow."

" No, I shall go. I'm resolved upon it. I won't stay here."

" Then we must shut the place up, or pull it down," said Harry. " It will look absurd, but—— Well, we never consider the neighbours." For the first time he seemed vexed. " I did count on your staying here," he explained.

" I can never forgive you for deceiving me."

" You said you wouldn't let your pride stand between us."

" It's not my pride. It's—its the revelation of what you are, and what you'll stoop to do, to gain—— ! "

" What have I gained yet ? " he asked. " Only what you choose to give me now ! "

She looked at him for a moment. The little scene in the corridor upstairs came back to her. So that was the meaning of it !

" I've taken your freedom from you. That's true. In return I've given you Blent. I did the best I could."

" Oh, do you really delude yourself like that ? What you did was utter selfishness."

Harry sighed. They were not getting on prosperously.

" Very well," he said. " We'll agree on that. There's been a revelation of what I am. I don't—I distinctly don't justify myself. It was a lie, a fraud."

" Yes," said Cecily, in a low but emphatic assent.

" I gained your consent by a trick, when you ought to have been free to give or refuse it. I admit it all."

" And it has brought us to this ! " She rose as she spoke, a picture of indignation. " There's no use talking any more about it," said she.

He looked at her long and deliberately. He seemed to weigh something in his mind, to ask whether he should or should not say something.

" And you conclude that the sort of person I am isn't fit to live with ? " he asked at last.

" I've told you what I've made up my mind to do. I can't help whether you stay or go too. But I'm going away from here, and going alone."

" Because I'm that sort of person ? "

" Yes. If you like to put it that way, yes."

" Very well. But before you go, a word about you ! Sit down, please." She obeyed his rather imperative gesture. " I've been meek," he smiled. " I've admitted all you said about me. And now, please, a word about you ! "

" About me ? What is there to say about me ? Oh, you're going back to that old story about my pride again ! "

Once more he looked long at her face. It was flushed and rebellious, it gave no hint of yielding to any weapon that he had yet employed.

" I'm not going to speak of your pride, but of your incredible meanness," said he.

" What ? " cried Cecily, rudely startled and sitting bolt upright.

" There's no harm in plain speaking, since we're going to part. Of your extraordinary meanness, Cecily—and really it's not generally a fault of the Tristrams."

" Perhaps you'll explain yourself," she said, relapsing into cold disdain, and leaning back again.

" I will. I mean to. Just look at the history of the whole affair." He rose and stood opposite her, constraining her to look at him, although her attitude professed a lofty indifference. " Here was I—in possession ! I was safe. I knew I was safe. I was as convinced of my safety as I am even now—when it's beyond question. Was I frightened ? Ask Mina, ask Duplay. Then you came. You know what I did. For your sake, because you were what you are, because I had begun to love you—yes, that's the truth of it—I gave it all to you. Not this place only, but all I had. Even my name—even my right to bear any name. Nobody and nameless, I went out of this house for you."

He paused a little, took a pace on the grass, and returned to her.

"What ought you to have felt, what ought you to have prayed then?" he asked. "Surely that it should come back to me, that it should be mine again?"

"I did," she protested, stirred to self-defence. "I was miserable. You know I was. I couldn't stay here for the thought of you. I came to London. I came to you, Harry. I offered it to you."

"It's you who are deceiving yourself now. Yes, you came and offered it to me. Did you want, did you pray, that it might be mine again by no gift of yours but by right? Did you pray that the thing should happen which has happened now? That you should be turned out and I should be put in? Back in my own place, my proper place? That I should be Tristram of Blent again? Did you pray for that?"

He paused, but she said nothing. Her face was troubled now and her eyes could not leave his.

"You were ready to play Lady Bountiful to me, to give of your charity, to make yourself feel very noble. That was it. And now——" His voice became more vehement. "And now, look into your heart, look close! Look, look! What's in your heart now? You say I've cheated you. It's true. Is that why you're angry, is that why you won't live with me? No, by Heaven, not that, or anything of the kind! Will you have the truth?"

Again she made no answer. She waited for his words.

"Are you rejoiced that mine's my own again, that I'm back in my place, that I'm Tristram of Blent, that it belongs to me? That I take it by my own incontestable right and not of your hand, by your bounty and your charity? Are you so rejoiced at that that you can forgive me anything, forgive the man you love anything? Yes, you do love me—You're welcome to that, if you think it makes it any better. It seems to me to make it worse. No, you can't forgive me anything, you can't forgive the man you love! Why not? I'll tell you why! Shall I? Shall I go on?"

She bowed her head and clasped her hands together.

"You hate my having come to my own again. You hate its being mine by right and not by your bounty. You hate

being Lady Tristram only because I've chosen to make you so. And because you hate that, you won't forgive me, and you say you won't live with me. Yes, you're angry because I've come to my own again. You hate it. Look in your heart, I say, and tell me that what I say isn't true, if you can."

She made no answer still. He came a step closer and smote his fist on the palm of his other hand, as he ended :

" You called me a liar. I was a liar. But, by God, you're a curmudgeon, Cecily ! "

For a moment longer she looked at him, as he stood there in his scornful anger. Then with a low moan she hid her face in her hands. The next minute he turned on his heel, left her where she sat, and strode off into the house.

Mina and Neeld—now at their sweets—heard his step and exchanged excited glances. He walked up to the head of the table, to Cecily's chair, plumped down into it, and called out to Mason : " Something to eat and some champagne."

" Yes, sir," said Mason in a flurry.

" Oh, by the by, you can say ' my lord ' again. The lawyers blundered, and there's been a mistake."

The astonished Mason began to express felicitations. Harry was petulantly short with him.

" Oh, shut up that, my dear man, and give me some champagne." He drank a glass off and then observed, " I hope you two have had a decent dinner ? " He had the manner of a host now.

" I—I hadn't much appetite," stammered Neeld.

" Well, I'm hungry anyhow," and he fell to on his beef, having waved soup and fish aside impatiently. " Tell them all downstairs what I've told you, Mason, but for Heaven's sake don't let there be any fuss. Oh, and I suppose you'd better keep something hot for Lady Tristram."

Mason's exit was hastened by the consciousness of his commission. The moment he was gone Mina broke out :

" Where's Cecily ? "

" I left her on the lawn," said Harry, frowning hard but eating heartily.

" You've told her ? "

" Yes, I've told her."

" And what did she say ? " The Imp's utterance was jerky from her perturbation.

" Look here, Mina, mightn't you go and ask her ? It's a long story, and I'm deuced hungry, you know."

Mina needed no further permission. She rose and flew. Neeld, though uncertain what was expected of him, sat on, nervously eating gooseberries—a fruit which rarely agreed with him. Harry drank a second glass of champagne and his brow relaxed, although he was still thoughtful.

" I—I hope all has gone well ? " Neeld ventured to inquire.

" I scarcely know. The interview took rather an unexpected turn." He spoke as though the development had surprised him and he could hardly trace how it had come about. " The whole thing will be settled very soon," he added. " Have a glass of port, Mr Neeld ? It'll do you more good than those gooseberries."

Neeld laid a ready hand on the decanter, as he asked :

" Is—er—Lady Tristram not coming in to dinner ? "

" Really I don't know. She didn't mention it." His thoughts seemed elsewhere. " Was I wrong to tell Mason to give me the title ? " he asked. " Ought I to wait till I've formally established my claim ? "

" Since it's quite clear, and there's no opposition from—from the dispossessed claimant——" Neeld smiled feebly and sipped his port.

" That's what I thought ; and it's as well to put things on a permanent basis as soon as possible. When once that's done, we shall think less about all this troublesome affair." He sat silent for a few minutes, while Neeld finished his wine. " I'm going to have some cheese. Don't you wait, Mr Neeld."

Old Neeld was glad to escape ; he could not understand his host's mood and was uneasy in talk with him. Moreover it seemed that the great question was being decided in the garden and not in the dining-room. To the garden then he betook himself.

Harry smoked a cigarette when his meal was done, twisting his chair round so that he could see Addie Tristram's picture. He reviewed his talk with Cecily, trying to trace how that unexpected turn in it had come about and at what point the weapon had sprung into his hand. He had used it with effect

—whether with the effect he desired he did not yet know. But his use of it had not been altogether a ruse or an artifice. His sincerity, his vehemence, his very cruelty proved that. He had spoken out a genuine resentment and a righteous reproach. Thence came the power to meet Cecily's taunts in equal battle and to silence her charges of deceit with his retort of meanness.

" And we were married to-day ! And we're damnably in love with one another ! " he reflected. " I suppose we should seem queer to some people." This was a great advance toward an outside view of the family. Certainly such an idea had never occurred to Addie ; she had always done the only possible thing ! " Now what will she do ? "

At least it did not seem as though she meant to have any dinner. The fact would have meant much had a man been concerned. With a woman it possessed no more than a moderate significance. With a Tristram woman perhaps it had none at all. A cigar succeeded the cigarette in Harry's mouth, as he sat there looking at his mother's picture and thinking of his wife. He did not in the least regret that she was his wife or that he had lied. Any scruples that he ever had on that score he had removed for himself by realizing that she was a curmudgeon. Neither did he regret what he had called the troublesome affair. It had brought new things into his life ; new thoughts and new powers had become his. And it had given him Cecily—unless one of them had still to go to town ! He glanced at the clock ; it was half-past nine. A sudden excitement came on him ; but he conquered it or at least held it down, and sat there, smoking still.

Mason returned and began to clear away. " Madame Zabriska has ordered some soup and claret to be placed in the hall for her ladyship, my lord," said he, in explanation of his action.

Soup and claret might mean anything—peace or war—going or staying—anything except sitting down to table with him. On the whole their omen was not encouraging. A sudden thought shot across his brain : " By Jove, if she's taken my cab ! " He jumped up ; but in a moment sat down again. The *coup* would be a good one, but it would not beat him. He would walk to Mingham and get a bed there. He was quite clear that he would not sleep alone at Blent. He glanced at

the clock again ; to catch the train at Fillingford she must start at ten—and so with him. Stay though, she might go to Merrion. Mina would give her shelter.

She had looked very beautiful. Oh, yes, yes ! Harry smiled as he conceded the natural man that point. It was seen plainly in retrospect ; he had not noticed it much at the time. He had been too much occupied in proving her a curmudgeon. One thing at a time was the Tristram way—provided the time were reasonably short. But he felt it now, and began to wonder if he had said too much. He decided that he had not said a word too much.

At last he got up very deliberately and went into the hall. It was a quarter to ten ; the soup and the claret were there. Harry stood looking at them a moment, but they could not answer his question. With an impatient shrug of his shoulders he walked out into the garden. And there his first thought was not of Cecily.

It was of Blent, Blent his own again, come back to him enriched by the experience of its loss, now no more all his life, but the background of that new life he had begun to make for himself. He was no longer puffed up by the possession of it —the new experiences had taught him a lesson there—but he was infinitely satisfied. Blent for his own, in his own way, on his own terms—that was what he wanted. See how fair it was in the still night ! He was glad and exultant that it was his again. Was he too a curmudgeon then ? Harry did not perceive how any reasonable person could say such a thing. A man may value what is his own without being a miser or a churl.

Nobody was to be seen in the garden—not Neeld, not Mina, nor Cecily. In surprise he walked the length and breadth of it without finding any of them. He went on to the bridge and peered about, and then on to the road ; he looked even in the river in a curiosity that forgot the impossible. He was alone. With a quick step he came back and strode round the house to the stables. His fly was gone. He searched for a man to question ; there was none ; they had all gone to supper or to bed. And the fly was gone. He returned to the bridge with an uncomfortable feeling of loneliness.

Something came upon him, an impulse or an instinct.

There was still a chance. She was not in the house, she was not in the garden. There was one other place where she still might be—if indeed she had not fled and left him desolate. Where? The answer seemed so easy to him, her choice of a spot so obvious. If he found her anywhere that night he would find her by the Pool, walking on the margin of its waters—where he had seen her first and started at the thought that she was his mother's phantom. He walked quickly up the valley, not thinking, his whole being strung to wait for and to meet the answer to his one great question.

On what things a man's life may seem to hang! A flutter of white through the darkness! That was all. Harry saw it with a great leap of the heart. His quick pace dropped to a leisurely saunter; he strolled on. She was walking toward him. Presently she stopped, and, turning toward the water, stood looking down into it. The Pool was very black that night, the clouds thick overhead. But for her white frock he might never have seen her at all. He came up to her and spoke in a careless voice.

"Where's Neeld?" he asked. "I can't find him anywhere."

"He's gone back to Fairholme, Harry. It was late. I was to say good night to you for him."

"And what have you done with Mina?" His voice was level, even, and restrained.

"Mina's gone to Merrion." She paused before she added: "She was tired, so I put her in your fly to go up the hill."

There was silence for a moment. Then he asked: "Did you tell the fly to come back again?"

Silence again, and then a voice of deceptive meekness of hidden mirth, answered him: "No, Harry."

"I knew you'd be here, if anywhere."

"Well, I was sure you'd come here to look for me, before you gave me up." She put out her hands and he took them in his. "It was all true that you said about me, all abominably true."

He did not contradict her.

"That's why I'm here," she went on. "When you've feelings like that, it's your duty not to run away from the place that excites them, but to stay there and fight them down manfully."

"I agree," said Harry gravely. "When you've basely deceived and tricked somebody it's cowardly to run away. The straightest thing is to stay with that person and try to redeem your character."

"How did you know it?" she asked. "I hardly knew it was in my heart myself."

"It sharpens a man's wits to be called a liar—and not to be able to deny the name."

"And you called me a—curmudgeon! Oh, how did you happen on that funny old word?" Her laugh rang fresh and gay through the quiet of the night. "After you'd gone, Mina came to me."

"What happened then?"

"Well, I ought to have cried—and Mina did."

"Did Mina stop you going?"

"Mina? No!" The acme of scorn was in her voice.

"What then?" he asked, drawing her a little nearer to him.

"I wanted to obey your wishes. You said I was to stay—and you'd go."

"Yes, but you've sent away the fly," objected Harry. "Well, all that you said of me was true too."

"We should start on a clear understanding then?"

"I'm a liar—and you're a curmudgeon? Yes."

"What awful quarrels we shall have!"

"I don't care a hang for them," said Harry.

"And what about the Arbitration?"

"Absurd, if I'm going to live in a state of war!"

Suddenly came a sound of wheels rolling briskly along the road from behind them. Cecily sprang away with a start.

"Oh, the fly's not come back?" she cried.

"Perhaps there's still a chance for one of us."

She caught him by the arm. "Listen! Is it stopping? No! It must be past the house!"

"Do you want it to stop?" he asked.

She turned her eyes on him; he saw them gleam through the darkness. He saw her lips just move; he heard no more than the lingering fear, the passionate reproach, of her murmured exclamation, "Oh, Harry!"

The next instant a voice rang out in the night, loud, mellow, and buoyant. They listened as it sang, its notes dominating

the sound of the wheels and seeming to fill the air around them, growing louder as the wheels came near, sinking again as they passed on the road to Mingham :

> " Drink to me only with thine eyes,
> And I will pledge with mine :
> Or leave a kiss but in the cup
> And I'll not look for wine.
> The thirst that from the soul doth rise
> Doth ask a drink divine :—"

Gradually, melodiously, and happily the voice died away in the distance, and silence came. Harry drew his love to him.

" Dear old Bob Broadley ! " said he softly. " He's driving back from Fairholme, and he seems most particularly jolly."

" Yes," she murmured. Then she broke into a low, merry, triumphant laugh. " I don't see why he should be so particularly jolly." She pressed his hand hard, laughing again. " He's only engaged," she whispered. " But we're married, aren't we, Harry ? "

" My dear, my dear, my dear ! " said he.

CHAPTER XXX

Till the Next Generation

MAJOR DUPLAY had taken a flat in town, and Mina had come up to aid him in the task of furnishing it. The Major was busy and prosperous in these days. Blinkhampton was turning up trumps for all concerned, for Iver, for Harry, for Southend, and for him ; the scheme even promised to be remunerative to the investing public. So he had told Mina that he must be on the spot, and that henceforward the country and the Continent would know him only in occasional days of recreation. He also murmured something about having met a very attractive woman, a widow of thirty-five. The general result seemed to be that he had forgotten his sorrows, was well content, and a good deal more independent of his niece's society and countenance than he had been before. All this Mina told to Lady Evenswood when she went to lunch in Green Street.

" Yes, I think I've launched uncle," said she complacently, " and now I shall devote myself to the Tristrams."

" You've been doing that for a long time, my dear."

" Yes, I suppose I have really," she laughed. " I've been a sort of Miss Swinkerton—I wish you knew her ! Only I devoted myself to one family and she does it for all the neighbourhood."

Lady Evenswood looked at her with a kindly smile.

" You were rather in love with Harry, you know," she said.

" Which was very absurd, but—yes, I was. Only then Cecily came and—well, it was altogether too artistic for me even to want to interfere. If I had wanted, it would have made no difference, of course. They've been pressing me to go on living at Merrion, and I shall."

" Oh, if you could get nothing but a pigsty on the estate, you'd take it. Though I don't know what you'll find to do."

" To do ? Oh, plenty ! Why, they're only just beginning, and—— ! " The wave of her hands expressed the endless possibilities of a Tristram household.

" And gradually you'll glide into being an old woman like me—looking at the new generation ! "

" Her children and his ! There ought to be something to look at," said Mina wistfully. " But we've not done with Harry himself yet."

" Robert says he's too fond of making money, or he might do something in politics."

" It isn't money exactly. It's a good deal Blent. He wants to make that splendid. Perhaps he'll come to the politics in time."

" He's made you believe in him anyhow."

" Yes, and I know I don't count. All the same I've seen a good deal of him. Mr Neeld and I have been in it right from the beginning."

" And in the end it was all a mare's nest. Fancy if Addie Tristram had known that ! "

" I think she liked it just as well as she thought it was. And I'm sure Harry did."

" Oh, if he's like that, he'll never do for the British public, my dear. He may get their money but he won't get their votes. After all, would you have the country governed by Addie Tristram's son ? "

" I suppose it would be rather risky," said the Imp reluctantly. But she cheered up directly on the strength of an obvious thought. " There are much more interesting things than politics," she said.

" And how is Cecily ? " asked Lady Evenswood.

" Oh, she's just adorable—and Mrs Iver's got her a very good housekeeper."

The old lady laughed as she turned to welcome Lord Southend.

" I've just met Disney," he remarked. " He doesn't seem to mind being out."

" Oh, he'll be back before long, and without his incumbrances. And Flora's delighted to get a winter abroad. It couldn't have happened more conveniently, she says."

" He told me to tell you that he thought your young friend—he meant Harry Tristram—was lost for ever now."

" What a shame ! " cried Mina indignantly.

" Just like Robert ! He never could understand that a man

has a history just as a country has. He is and ought to be part of his family."

"No sense of historical continuity," nodded Southend. "I agree, and that's just why, though I admire Disney enormously, I——"

"Generally vote against him on critical occasions? Yes, Robert makes so many admirers like that."

"Is his work at Blinkhampton nothing?" demanded Mina.

"He got in for that while he was dispossessed," smiled Southend. "I say, thank Heaven he wouldn't have the viscounty!"

"That would have been deplorable," agreed Lady Evenswood.

"It's all a very curious little episode."

"Yes. No more than that."

"Yes, it is more," cried Mina. "Without it he'd never have married Cecily."

"Romance, Madame Zabriska, romance!" Southend shook his head at her severely.

Mina flinched a little under the opprobrium of the word. Yet why? In these days we have come to recognize—indeed there has been small choice in the matter, unless a man would throw away books and wear cotton-wool in his ears—that the romance of one generation makes the realities of the next, and that a love affair twenty years old becomes a problem in heredity, demanding the attention of the learned, and receiving that of the general public also. So that though the affair and the man be to all seeming insignificant, consolation may be found in the prospect of a posthumous importance; and he who did nothing very visible in his lifetime may, when his son's biography comes to be written, be held grandfather to an epic poem or a murder on the high seas—and it seems to be considered that it is touch and go which way the thing turns out. Are there then any episodes left? Does not everything become an enterprise of great pith and moment, with results that will probably, some day or other, be found to admit of mathematical demonstration? Happily the human race, in practice if not in theory, declines the conclusion. We know that we are free, and there's an end of it, said Dr Johnson. Well, at least we

can still think that we are doing what we like—and that's the beginning of most things.

That temporary inferiority of Bob Broadley's, on which Cecily had touched so feelingly, was soon redressed, and after the wedding Harry had a talk with the bride. It was not unnatural that she should blush a little when he spoke to her—a passing tribute to the thought of what might have been. Harry greeted it with a laugh.

"I suppose we'd better be straightforward about this?" he said. "Mingham's so near Blent, you see. We're both very glad, aren't we, Mrs Broadley?"

"I imagine so," said Janie. "You show no signs of pining anyhow."

"And as to our behaviour—there's not a father in the kingdom who wouldn't think us right."

"I was the worst—because I think I was in love with Bob all the time."

"I was just as bad—because I thought you were too," said Harry.

"How could we do it then?" she asked.

"That's the odd thing. It didn't seem at all out of the way at the time," he pondered.

"You'd do it again now, if the case arose, but I shouldn't. That's the difference," said she.

Harry considered this remark for a moment with an impartial air. "Well, perhaps I should," he admitted at last, "but you needn't tell that to Cecily. Content yourself with discussing it with Mina or Mr Neeld."

"I'm tired of both of them," she cried. "They do nothing but talk about you."

That night as he sat in the garden at Blent with his wife, Harry returned the compliment by talking of the Imp. He looked up toward Merrion and saw the lights in the windows.

"I think Mina is with us for life, Cecily," said he.

"I like her to be," she answered with a laugh. "First because I like being loved, and she loves me. And then I like you to be loved, and she loves you. Besides, she's been so closely mixed up with it all, hasn't she? She knew about you before I did, she knew Blent before I did. And it's not only

with you and me. She knew your mother, Addie Tristram, too."

"Yes, Mina goes right back to the beginning of the thing."

"And the thing, as you call it, is what brought us here together. So Mina seems to have had something to do with that too. It all comes back to me when I look at her, and I like to have her here."

"Well, she's part of the family story now. And she'll probably keep a journal and make entries about us, like the late Mr Cholderton, and some day be edited by a future Mr Neeld. Mina must stop, that's clear."

"It's clear anyhow—because nothing would make her go," said Cecily.

"Let's go up the hill and see her now?" he suggested.

Together they climbed the hill and reached the terrace. There were people in the drawing-room, and Harry signed to Cecily to keep out of sight. They approached stealthily.

"Who's with her? I didn't know anyone was staying here," whispered Cecily.

Harry turned his face toward her, smiling. "Hush, it's old Neeld!"

They peeped in. Neeld was sitting in an armchair with some sheets of paper in his hand. He had his spectacles on and apparently had been reading something aloud to Mina; indeed they heard his voice die away just as they came up. Mina stood in front of him, her manner full of her old excitement.

"Yes, that's it, that's just right!" they heard her exclaim. "She stood in the middle of the room and"—Harry pressed his wife's hand and laughed silently—"she cried out just what you've read. I remember exactly how she looked and the very words that Mr Cholderton uses. 'Think of the difference it makes, the enormous difference!' she said. Oh, it might have been yesterday, Mr Neeld!"

Harry leapt over the window-sill and burst into the room with a laugh.

"Oh, you dear, silly people, you're at it again!" said he.

"The story does not lose its interest for me," remarked old Mr Neeld primly, and he added, as he greeted Cecily, "It

won't so long as I can look at your face, my dear. You keep Addie Tristram still alive for me."

" She's Lady Tristram—and I'm the enormous difference, I suppose," said Harry.

Mina and Neeld did not quite understand why Cecily turned so suddenly and put her hand in Harry's, saying : " No, Harry, there's no difference now."

Meanwhile, down in Blentmouth, Miss Swinkerton looked up from the local paper and remarked across the table to Mrs Trumbler :

" Here's an announcement that Lady Tristram will give a ball at Blent in January. You'll remember that I told you that two months ago, Mrs Trumbler."

" Yes, Miss Swinkerton, but that was before all the——"

" Really I'm not often wrong, my dear," interrupted Miss S. decisively.

" Well, I hope there won't be any more changes," sighed Mrs Trumbler. " They're so very startling."

She might rest in peace awhile. Addie Tristram was dead, and the title to Blent was safe till the next generation. Beyond that it would not perhaps be safe to speak in view of the Tristram blood and the Tristram ways.